

(Devotional #44) ***Spiritual Conflict in the Church***

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work – 2 Timothy 3:16-17

In one of Paul's letters, he encourages Timothy to "*retain the standard of sound words that you have heard from me*" ... and to "*guard the treasure that has been entrusted to you*¹." Paul instructs Timothy, and those of us who read his apostolic admonition to this young man, "*not to wrangle about words that are useless and lead to the ruin of those so engaged*²." Paul is diligent to instruct Timothy about the danger of apostasy entering the church through the words of evil men and women, "*who are religious on the outside, but deny the power of the gospel on the inside*³" ... and thus even their religious acts are unprofitable.

Timothy is encouraged to "*continue in the things he has learned from Paul, which are the same things he has known from childhood*," namely, that "*the sacred writings – (Scripture) – are able to impart wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*."

These are important, if not invaluable, words spoken by Paul, who when he speaks, does so with apostolic authority. Apostolic authority is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament phrase, "*Thus saith the LORD*." Only the ancient prophets could claim such authority, to speak in the name and power of Almighty God. But recall, Paul begins this letter to Timothy by asserting his authority to speak in this manner when he says, "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus*⁴." So, what Paul says to Timothy in the early days of the Dispensation of Grace, he says also to us, who are living in the latter days of this same dispensation. And though addressed directly to Timothy, Paul's words may be even more pertinent to us.

Why would I say such a thing? Well, because though Timothy had to face the problems caused by false teachers in his day, the apostasy entering the church through false teachers in our day may be worse. In the first century, a false teacher could influence only the small group of people with whom he came into direct contact. Today, a false teacher can publish a book or be broadcast by the global media worldwide and thereby influence millions of people. We should not be surprised by this. Paul begins the third chapter of his second letter to Timothy by saying, "*in the last days (i.e., right now) difficult times will come*." These *difficult times* will begin with '**a moral apostasy**' and will end with the outright **rejection of the Word of God**.

Apostasy is "*the act of rejecting a body of truth formerly held to be right*." For the Christian, *moral apostasy* involves rejecting moral principles laid out for us in Scripture. In fact, this is consistent with Paul's outline of moral decline in Romans Chapter One, where he describes the pattern this apostasy will take.

The passage in Romans⁵ asserts that "*the wrath of God will be poured out against those who suppress the truth by means of unrighteousness*." Scripture is clear – God has made Himself

¹ See 2 Timothy 1:13-14

² See 2 Timothy 2:14

³ See 2 Timothy 3:1-9

⁴ See 2 Timothy 1:1, and compare also 1 Timothy 1:1

⁵ See Romans 1:18-32

known by means of His creation, such that those who reject God's clear revelation, *one day will stand before Him without excuse*⁶. And this rejection will begin with a moral collapse⁷.

If we look at the pattern laid out for us in Romans One, we will see that moral apostasy begins with a heterosexual revolution: *"Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them."* A heterosexual revolution is the first phase of the moral collapse of individuals and nations. A person would be hard-pressed not to know that our culture began a downturn in this regard in the mid-1960's and has continued in decline ever since.

The second phase is similar to the first, but with a twist: phase two is a homosexual revolution.

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped the creature rather than the Creator ... and for this reason God gave them over to degrading passions, for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way, also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error – Romans 1:24-27

These verses do not require additional commentary for they state clearly the sad situation in which we find ourselves today. The rate of cultural decline in America regarding this matter, and the resulting redefinition of the Divine Institution of Marriage, is evident to all. On June 26, 2015, the White House, the national symbol of our country, was lit with the rainbow colors, celebrating the adoption of homosexual marriage as an American standard, though it is a perversion of God's ordained plan for the relationship of man and woman⁸.

Our moral decline, evidenced by phases one and two, are exceeded only by the third: the complete inability to think, otherwise known as moral insanity. I will refrain from listing all the unpleasant adjectives Paul uses in Romans 1:28-32 and only mention his reference to a depraved mind. Phase three in the devolution into moral apostasy is the loss of the ability to think ... we call this state *'insanity.'* Paul says, *"God gave them over to a depraved mind⁹,"* then in verse 31, he describes this same moral failure as being *'without understanding.'* The word *'mind'* calls our attention to *'thinking.'* Much of Scripture is based on how human beings think¹⁰. One never expects to have to say what I am about to write, but apparently that time has come. We live in a culture where human beings no longer can discern if they are male or female. A recent article stated that academics now claim there are 123-genders. Draw your own conclusions.

⁶ See Romans 1:18-23, and also Psalm 19:1-6

⁷ Romans 1:18-3:20 more fully describes the downward progression of human depravity. I believe this moral collapse, and the divine discipline it brings, occur both on an individual level, i.e., in the lives of those, who reject Jesus Christ, as well as in the national lives of nations. So, what can take place in an individual who rejects the gospel, also can happen to a nation that falls away from God's Moral Law. See Leviticus 26:14-31, where five cycles of divine discipline for apostate nations are outlined by Moses. For a more in-depth treatment of the five cycles of divine discipline, see my introduction to the study of Daniel (Lesson 1) on the church website: (<https://www.gracebiblechurch.org/adult-bible-classes/lessons/foundations/daniel/>).

⁸ See <https://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2015/06/26/white-house-rainbow-gay-marriage/29374471/>

⁹ See Romans 1:28, and then compare Hebrews 6:8, where the term 'depraved' mind is translated 'worthless.' The Greek term is ἀδόκιμος (pronounced 'adokimos') and means, 'morally worthless.'

¹⁰ 'Repentance,' for example means 'to change your mind' (Greek μετανοέω, pronounced 'metavoeo'), thus, 'to change the way you think about sin.' The Bible puts far more emphasis on how we think than on how we feel.

Now before we turn to the topic of the outright rejection of the Word of God, I want to call your attention to the phrase, “*God gave them over.*” This phrase occurs in Romans 1:24, 26, and 28 and in every case, refers to the end of God’s patience with mankind. We see the end of God’s patience in Genesis 6:13, when He said to Noah, “*the end of all flesh has come before me,*” and what followed was the great flood of Genesis 7. Then once again, in Genesis 11, God put an end to the ancient symbol of internationalism, known as the Tower of Babel. When the Northern Kingdom of Israel persisted in her idolatry, God ‘whistled’ and the Assyrian army invaded the North and carried the people of that kingdom into slavery¹¹. When the Southern Kingdom fell into moral apostasy, God brought the Chaldeans, under the command of Nebuchadnezzar II, to pillage Judah and carry her people into the Babylonian Captivity¹². When Belshazzar mocked the Lord by drinking wine from the stolen, temple chalices, He brought in the Persians, who killed Belshazzar and took over his throne and kingdom¹³. Then the great diaspora of the Jews followed Israel’s rejection of Jesus Christ. God is patient, but His patience has a limit.

The end result of moral apostasy is a rejection of the Word of God. Paul warned Timothy of this outcome by saying:

The time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths, so be focused in all things, endure hardships, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry
– 2 Timothy 4:2-4

This is not a grim possibility; this is an absolute certainty, so let’s look at what this certain outcome entails:

- “*The time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine*” – Paul is looking down the corridor of time and following a trajectory that already was in play. In other words, in Timothy’s ministry, already there were men (*and women*), who were rejecting the Word of God (*sound doctrine*). The gospel is good news to those, who receive it; but to those, who reject the good news, it is foolishness (*to Gentiles*) and a stumbling block¹⁴ (*to Jews*). Paul’s warning is that this rejection of sound doctrine is going to get progressively worse over time. In fact, as apostasy increases, both in the culture and in the church, it will indicate the imminent Rapture of the Church, to be followed by the Great Tribulation (*i.e., judgment*), then seven-years later by the 2nd Advent of Jesus Christ, who will come to judge the nations.
- “*But wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires*” – The thirst for novelties in doctrine, the desire for teaching that soothes the conscience, and a preference for teaching that allows for self-indulgence, always will draw a crowd. Joel Osteen preaches every Sunday to thousands, who soak up his prosperity gospel messages like a dry sponge, but at the end of the day,

¹¹ See Isaiah 5:26 ... *God has sovereign control over the Gentile nations. All He must do is ‘whistle’ and they obey His supreme command.*

¹² Notice in the opening words of the Book of Daniel (Daniel 1:1-2): “*The Lord gave Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.*” It was not an accident that the Southern Kingdom went into the Babylonian Captivity. God brought judgment on Judah just as He had brought it on the Northern Kingdom 136-years earlier.

¹³ See Daniel 5:17-31

¹⁴ See 1 Corinthians 1:23

Osteen’s gospel is not salvific, *i.e.*, the gospel he preaches is what Paul calls, “*another gospel that is not another*¹⁵” – it is a gospel that will not save.

- “*But instead, (they) will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.*” In other words, as apostasy increases, men prefer myths and fantasies over truth. I spent a pleasant morning one day in 2006 at the airport in Waxahachie talking to a friend, who was preparing to fly to Austin with another pilot to pick up an airplane, then fly it back to Waxahachie. I was getting ready to fly to Stephenville to have lunch at the Hard-8 BBQ restaurant ... a popular destination for what pilots laughingly call “*the hundred-dollar hamburger.*” We taxied our planes out together and prepared to depart. My friend took off first, then I followed him into the sky. As I turned west for my destination, he continued flying south to his. As our courses diverged, I called him on the radio to wish him a good flight. I had no idea I would never speak to him again. They found the plane and both deceased pilots somewhere near the Rio Grande River. Carbon monoxide had killed both men before they got anywhere near Austin, and the plane, on autopilot, flew until fuel exhaustion brought it down just shy of the border with Mexico.

This incident caused me to do some study about carbon monoxide ... and one of the things I learned surprised me. If given the choice between an oxygen molecule and a carbon monoxide molecule, your lungs will prefer the carbon monoxide molecule – and will choose it over oxygen. Did you know that? I didn’t! The NTSB noted that the heater in the crashed aircraft was **OFF**. It was winter; why was the heater off? Also, the side window to the plane was **OPEN**. Why? It was even colder in the higher altitudes than it was on the ground. I know the answer to these questions. Both men were seasoned pilots. They knew the effects of carbon monoxide poisoning and they knew exactly what was happening ... so they turned off the heater, a prime source of carbon monoxide in an airplane, and they opened the window ... but it didn’t do any good. Their lungs grabbed the wrong molecules and they died.

I am telling you this story for a reason: what you hear from the pulpit, and what you absorb from the culture, matters. The unbelieving heart of the natural man always will accept the lie – the myth – over the truth. What is the myth? Almost everything you hear from the National Media. Only when the Holy Spirit quickens the mind to understand and accept the gospel, will a man come to faith in Jesus Christ. There always will be a market for the lie – and apart from the Holy Spirit’s guidance, we all are susceptible.

- So, Paul tells Timothy – and us – “*to stay focused in all things, endure hardships, do the work of an evangelist, and fulfill the ministry.*” To do these things, we must know the truth, understand the gospel, and be unwavering in our commitment to sound doctrine – and we must demand this same unwavering commitment to sound doctrine from our church leaders, pastors, and elders.

I will end by repeating the words of Alister Begg, “*when what is primary becomes peripheral, what is peripheral will become primary.*” We cannot be party to a diminished gospel. Our commission is to preach the true gospel, and as we do so, make disciples for our Lord Jesus Christ. Myths abound, but the truth never changes.

¹⁵ See Galatians 1:6-7