

Approved.

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to fight about words. This is useless and leads to the ruin of those who listen. ¹⁵Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth.

¹⁶Avoid irreverent and empty speech, since those who engage in it will produce even more godlessness, ¹⁷and their teaching will spread like gangrene. Hymenaeus and Philetus are among them. ¹⁸They have departed from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and are ruining the faith of some. ¹⁹Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, bearing this inscription: **The Lord knows those who are his**, and let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness.

2 Timothy 2:14-19 (CSB)

Background:

Paul shifts concern to not necessarily specific arguments but how to handle arguments when they arise.

- Some are prone to grandiose speech. They like to use fancy & flowery words that are not necessary. Or they do it to sound smart & impress others.
- There were petty arguments that were arising that no one could adequately answer & yet they were arguing over them anyways.
 - Men had strong opinions but were light on the facts. But that didn't keep them from fighting.
 - It was causing rifts in the church.
 - It was causing some to question & leave the Faith. (v.16)
 - It was spreading like a disease to others & corrupting them. (v.17)
 - Making them Prideful.
 - Disrespectful toward other Believers.

The “worker” in reference here is a Teacher! There are two kinds of Teachers/Workman...

Approved workman

- Someone who correctly handles the teaching of God’s Word.
- An approved workman knows that false doctrine is dangerous, and he will oppose it. Paul compared it (false teaching) to gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17).
- He makes it easy for people to follow him to the cross.

Not approved workman

- Someone who incorrectly handles the teaching of God’s Word.
 - Hymenaeus and Philetus were teaching that the resurrection had already occurred.
 - That believers had already entered the glorified post-resurrection state.
 - No more pain, suffering, sorrow... If you are experiencing those things then you must not be saved?
 - Much like the disease of the Prosperity Gospel where they false teachers, unapproved workman, claim that God just wants you to be happy, healthy, and wealthy.

“The aim of all Christian discussion and of all Christian action is to bring a man nearer to God.” (Barclay)

Example: I was taking Amanda home after our first date but I was lost and driving in the completely wrong direction!

- This is what Godless chatter & false teachings do. You may go a long distance but you are progressing the WRONG WAY!

Who is a Workman? - Yes, Sunday school teachers, Pastors, discipleship leaders are all good examples of workman/teachers. But we are all workman...

- Parents pointing the way to Christ for their kids

- Co-workers sharing the Truth of the Gospel
- Picking up a hitchhiker & giving him a ride...

We are to be accurate & clear about scripture.

Example:

- Using “Christianese” when we are witnessing.
 - Bought by the blood of the lamb...
 - WHAT?!
 - That may be accurate but that isn’t clear.
- Information overload when sharing the Gospel.
 - They don’t need to know about “Armageddon” or even how old the earth is...
 - They need to know who Jesus is and what he did.
 - When it comes to the Gospel those things aren’t necessary. Again, we are muddying the waters.
- We get the information wrong.
 - I was sharing one time and I was getting flustered and started talking about how we need to do this and do that to prove our faith is genuine.
 - Essentially I was talking to this Muslim man about a works based religion.
 - My desire was to see him come to know Christ. My information was completely wrong. I wasn’t accurate, nor was I clear. The only thing I was, was clearly wrong.
- That’s going to happen. Friends, sometimes we are going to blow it.
 - We repent. We apologize. We pick up a book and do a little more research so we are better prepared next time but we

keep proclaiming anyways. We keep striving to be an approved workman.

We are to be accurate & clear about scripture.

So does this mean we shouldn't speak the Truth if we don't have it all figured out?

- If we don't know the answer, we just know that _____ isn't right?

The Holy Spirit will give us the words to say.

- My baseball coach & I were having a discussion on Jesus & evolution.
 - Maybe God sent other "Messiah's" other "Jesus'" to other planets?

There is no place in our heart or our *teaching* for anger, malice, disdain, & arrogance.

We are to be accurate & clear about scripture.

- Grace, humility, a passion for the Lord; ought to be what a we are known for.
- The world needs the Gospel. The only way is Jesus Christ and Him Crucified, buried, resurrected, and now glorified.
 - We ought to be a people that Love God, Love Others, Serve All. But we share. Yes, we go to Africa to share. But we also should go across the street.

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to fight about words. This is useless and leads to the ruin of those who listen. ¹⁵ Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth. ¹⁶ Avoid irreverent and empty speech, since those who engage in it will produce even more godlessness, ¹⁷ and their teaching will spread like gangrene. Hymenaeus and Philetus are among them. ¹⁸ They have departed from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and are ruining the faith of some. ¹⁹ Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, bearing this inscription: **The Lord knows those who are his**, and let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness.

2 Timothy 2:14-19 (CSB)

The Workman (2 Tim. 2:14–18)

The word *study* (2 Tim. 2:15) has nothing to do with books and teachers. It means “to be diligent, be zealous.” It is translated in this way in 2 Timothy 4:9, 21, and also in Titus 3:12. The emphasis in this paragraph is that the workman needs to be diligent in his labors so that he will not be ashamed when his work is inspected. “Rightly dividing” means “cutting straight” and can be applied to many different tasks: plowing a straight furrow, cutting a straight board, sewing a straight seam.

The pastor is a workman in God’s Word. The Word is a treasure that the steward must guard and invest. It is the soldier’s sword and the farmer’s seed. But it is also the workman’s tool for building, measuring, and repairing God’s people. The preacher and teacher who use the Word correctly will build their church the way God wants it to be built. But a sloppy worker will handle God’s Word deceitfully in order to make it say what he wants it to say (2 Cor. 4:2). When God tests our ministries in His local churches, some of it, sad to say, will become ashes (1 Cor. 3:10ff).

An approved worker diligently studies the Word and seeks to apply it to his own life. An ashamed worker wastes his time with other “religious duties” and has little or nothing to give his class or congregation. An approved worker does not waste his time arguing about “words to no profit” (2 Tim. 2:14) because he knows that such arguing only undermines God’s work (see 1 Tim. 6:4; Titus 3:9).

An approved workman will shun “godless chatter” (2 Tim. 2:16, NIV; and see 1 Tim. 6:20), because he knows it only leads to more ungodliness. I fear that some “sharing times” do more harm than good as well-meaning people exchange their “spiritual ignorance.”

An approved workman knows that false doctrine is dangerous, and he will oppose it. Paul compared it to gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17). Much as gangrene spreads, infects, and kills other tissue, so false doctrine spreads and infects the body of believers, the church. This infection must be exposed and removed. Only the “sound [healthy] doctrine” of the Word of God can keep a church healthy and growing.

Paul named two men who were false teachers, and he also identified their error. It is likely that the Hymenaeus named here (2 Tim. 2:17) is the same man named in 1 Timothy 1:20. We know nothing about his associate, Philetus. Both of them “wandered from the truth” by teaching that the resurrection had already taken place. Perhaps they taught that salvation is resurrection in a spiritual sense, so a believer must not expect a physical resurrection. But the denial of a physical resurrection is a serious thing (see 1 Cor. 15:12ff), for it involves the resurrection of Christ and the completion of God’s plan of salvation for His people. No wonder these false teachers were able to “overthrow the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:18). The Resurrection is a foundational truth of the Gospel.

Each of us as God’s workman will be either *approved* or *ashamed*. The word *approved* means “one who has been tested and found acceptable.” The word was used for testing and approving metals. Each trial that we go through forces us to study the Word to find God’s will. As we rightly use the Word, we succeed in overcoming our trials, and we are approved by God. Martin Luther once said that prayer, study, and suffering make a pastor; and this is true. We cannot be approved unless we are tested.

What does it mean to be “ashamed”? Certainly it means that such a workman’s work is below standard and cannot be accepted. It means loss of reward. In fact, in Paul’s day, a builder was

finished if he failed to follow the specifications. When the Lord judges our works, it will be revealed whether we as workmen have handled the Word of God honestly and carefully. Some who are now first will end up last!¹

7. Metaphor IV: The Unashamed Workman (verses 14–19)

We will leave verse 14 aside for the moment and proceed straight to verse 15. Several facts are immediately evident from this exhortation to Timothy to aim to be an unashamed workman.

First, the kind of work the Christian workman does is teaching. He is called to handle ‘the word of truth’.

Secondly, there are two kinds of workman. On the one hand, there are those who are ‘approved’, ‘tried and true’ (AG), who having been tested like coins or metals and passed the test are recognized as ‘sterling’;¹ on the other hand there are those who are not approved, because they fail the test. The former group have ‘no need to be ashamed’, while the latter ought to be deeply ashamed of themselves.

Thirdly, the difference between these two categories concerns their handling or treatment of ‘the word of truth’, the good deposit.

So Paul sets these two kinds of teacher in contrast, and supplies an example of each. Timothy (15) is to be a good workman, approved and not ashamed. Hymenaeus and Philetus (17), however, are bad workmen who have forfeited God’s approval (whatever approval they may have obtained from men) and have every reason to be ashamed.

Further, the work of these good and bad workmen is summed up in pregnant verbs. The good workman ‘cuts straight’ (15, literally) the word of truth; the bad workman ‘swerves’ (18) or deviates from the truth. We must look at these more fully and separately.

a. The good workman

The verb in verse 15 (*orthotomeō*), translated in rsv ‘rightly handling’ means literally not to ‘divide rightly’ (av) but to ‘cut straight’. It is a very unusual word and occurs three times only in biblical Greek, once in the New Testament (this verse) and twice in the book of Proverbs, where in 3:6 we read ‘He will make straight your paths’, and in 11:5 ‘The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight’.

How then is ‘the word of truth’ being pictured that Timothy is commanded to make or cut it straight? Not as a sacrificial victim to be cut into pieces, as some ancient commentators thought; nor as a loaf, so that ‘Paul assigns to teachers the duty of carving or dividing the Word, like a

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 246–249). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

father dividing the bread into small pieces to feed the children'; nor as a ribbon to be cut into strips, or a plot into allotments, as some modern dispensationalists teach; nor even, I think, as a stone which masons cut to fit into a building, as C. K. Barrett suggests; but rather as a road or path or—to be more modern—as a motorway or freeway needs to be cut straight through the countryside. Thus, Arndt and Gingrich define the verb as meaning to '“cut a path in a straight direction” or “cut a road across country (that is forested or otherwise difficult to pass through) in a straight direction”, so that the traveller may go directly to his destination'. Or, possibly, the metaphor may be taken rather from ploughing than from roadmaking, so that the NEB, following Chrysostom, renders it 'driving a straight furrow in your proclamation of the truth'.

'The word of truth' is the apostolic faith which Timothy has received from Paul and is to communicate to others. For us it is, quite simply, Scripture. To 'cut it straight' or 'make it a straight path' is to be accurate on the one hand and plain on the other in our exposition. Apparently Sophocles used the word for 'to expound soundly' (MM). Thus the good workman is true to Scripture. He does not falsify it. Nor does he try to confuse people, like Elymas the sorcerer, by 'making crooked the straight paths of the Lord' (Acts 13:10). On the contrary, he handles the word with such scrupulous care that he both stays on the path himself, keeping to the highway and avoiding the byways, and makes it easy for others to follow.

b. The bad workman

The metaphor Paul employs to describe the bad workman is taken neither from civil engineering nor from agriculture but from archery. So now the truth is likened not to a road being built or a furrow being ploughed but to a target being shot at. The verb (18) is *astochēō*, which comes from *stochos*, a 'target', and means to 'miss the mark' and so to 'deviate' from something. It occurs three times in the Pastoral Epistles:

'Certain persons by swerving from these (sc. genuine love, a good conscience and sincere faith) have wandered away into vain discussion' (1 Tim. 1:16). 'For by professing it (sc. 'what is falsely called knowledge') some have missed the mark as regards the faith' (1 Tim. 6:21). 'Who have swerved from the truth ...' or as in NEB, 'shot wide of the truth' (2 Tim. 2:18).

We are now in a position to grasp the alternative which Paul sets before every Christian teacher entrusted with the word of truth, and which determines whether he will be a good or a bad workman.

The word of truth is a target. As he shoots at this target, he will either hit it or miss it.

The word of truth is a road. As he cuts this road through the forest, he will make it either straight or crooked.

As a result of what he does, that is, how he teaches, others are bound to be affected, for better or for worse. If he cuts the road straight, people will be able to follow and so keep in the way. If, on the other hand, he misses the mark, the attention of the spectators will be distracted from the target and their eyes will follow the arrow however widely astray it has gone.

Of this grave danger Paul warns Timothy here. There were some in Asia who were teaching serious error. Instead of preaching Paul's gospel which included 'Jesus Christ risen from the dead'

(8), the pledge and pattern of his people's resurrection, they were saying 'that the resurrection is past already' (18). Of course in one sense it is, in that Christ has risen and his people have already risen with him. Yet the resurrection of the body lies still in the future. The false teachers, however, were denying any bodily resurrection to come (cf. Acts 17:32; 1 Cor. 15:12). They were perhaps early Gnostics to whom the body was an evil encumbrance and the concept of any bodily resurrection therefore as inconceivable as it was undesirable. So they 'spiritualized' it as a release from the flesh through *gnōsis* (knowledge), or by asserting that the promise of resurrection had been entirely fulfilled when by faith and baptism we were raised with Christ. Similarly today some 'demythologize' the resurrection and speak only of faith rising in the Christian's heart.

Such heretics were substituting for 'the word of truth' what Paul calls 'disputing about words' (14). The verb he employs here (*logomacheō*) occur nowhere else in the New Testament, although the noun *logomachia*, 'word-battle' (AG), is found in 1 Timothy 6:4 and some mss of Titus 3:9. He seems to be referring to something 'like the hair-splittings of the schoolmen' in the middle ages. Elsewhere he calls it 'godless chatter' (16, *kenophōnia* or 'empty talk').

Paul's instruction to Timothy about such bad workmen or false teachers is to 'avoid' them: '... charge them before the Lord to avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers' (14). 'Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will eat its way like gangrene' (16, 17a).

The damage caused by such false teaching is double. It is both 'godless' and 'gangrenous'. That is, in the first place, it leads people away from God. What verse 16 literally says is that those who hold such teaching 'advance into more and more ungodliness'. It is hardly an 'advance', however. As Patrick Fairbairn comments,¹ it is 'a forward movement in the wrong direction'. In the second place, it spreads its infection in the community. Three times Paul reiterates this for emphasis: It 'does no good, but only ruins the hearers' (14b). 'Their teachings are as dangerous as blood poisoning to the body and spread like sepsis from a wound' (17 JBP). 'They are upsetting the faith of some' (18b).

These two tendencies of heresy are most revealing. We would be wise to ask ourselves regarding every kind of teaching both what its attitude is towards God and what effect it has upon men. There is invariably something about error which is dishonouring to God and damaging to men. The truth, on the other hand, always honours God, promoting godliness (cf. Tit. 1:16), and always edifies its hearers. Instead of causing a *katastrophē* (14), upsetting them or turning them upside down, it builds them up in faith, love and holiness.

Although the faith of men can be upset (18b), the foundation of God remains secure. This is the true church which he is building. It has a twofold 'seal' or 'inscription' (JBP, NEB). The first is secret and invisible, namely 'The Lord knows those who are his' and will therefore keep them safe for ever. The second is public and visible, namely 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity', and so let him prove that he belongs to the Lord by his holiness. The reference is probably to the Old Testament story of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, from which incident both quotations come (Nu. 16:5, 26). Ultimately, Paul is saying, it is only the Lord who knows and recognizes his own people, and can tell the true from the spurious, for only he sees the heart. But though we cannot see the heart, we can see the life, which is the one reliable evidence of the heart's condition, and is apparent to all. Both 'seals' are essential, however, the divine and the human, the unseen and the seen. Together they bear witness to 'God's firm foundation', his true church.

It is doubtless the reference to the necessity of departing from evil which leads Paul to the next metaphor.²

FROM THE WARM words of encouragement in 2:1–10 and the lofty saying of 2:11–13 we suddenly find ourselves back in the world of the Ephesian church with its heretical teachers. This does not mean discontinuity, for verse 14 refers back to what has just been said with the exhortation to “keep reminding them of these things.” But Timothy’s act of reminding must be accompanied by an act of warning, an act so sobering that it is said to be “before God.”

How to Deal With Destructive Teaching (2:14–19)

THE NIV “KEEP reminding” (v. 14) brings out the present tense of the verb. “Warn” is a participle, also in the present tense. This tense indicates that the task is not complete but requires constant attention. The relationship between indicative and participle suggests that the two are concurrent, with a positive action, reminding, and a negative one, warning. What Timothy has taught them is a point of reference for the warning.

The contemporary reader of the completed New Testament is well aware that words are important and that precise wording is necessary for precise theology. But here Paul is warning “against quarreling about words [*logomacheo*].” Paul does not enlarge here on what the controversy is about, but rather offers two clear reasons against allowing it: It is without value and does no good, and it ruins the listeners and therefore does evil.

This is the setting against which Paul writes the well-known words of verse 15. The words “do your best” represents the Greek verb *spoudazo* in the Pastorals (cf. the related adverb in 1:17 [trans. “hard” in NIV] and Titus 3:13 [trans. “do everything you can”]). The idea is doing something with diligence and perhaps with haste and urgency. It communicates the idea of zeal. Timothy is to be concerned with God’s approval and so must deliberately present himself to that end. “Approved” (*dokimos*) appears only here in the Pastoral Letters, though its antonym *adokimos* (“disapproved”) occurs in 3:8 (NIV “rejected”) and in Titus 1:16 (NIV “unfit”). Timothy is not simply to court God’s approval but to be the kind of worker who is approved so that he can present himself to God. The word for “workman” was often used for agricultural workers.

The instructions to remind and warn begin, in the Greek sentence order, with the word *tauta*, “these things.” Although an ordinary and seemingly unimportant expression, it is repeated several times in the Pastoral Letters and has considerable significance (see also esp. 1 Tim. 4:6, 11; 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 2:15; 3:8) to refer to the range of doctrines Paul has

² Stott, J. R. W. (1973). [*Guard the Gospel the message of 2 Timothy*](#) (pp. 66–80). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

instructed Timothy and Titus to pass on. The two uses in this present chapter either refer to specific teachings (v. 2) or follow a saying that is obviously at least one element in the teachings (v. 14). This is another way in which the present passage picks up a pattern of careful provision for the promulgation of apostolic teachings.

It may be asked why anyone would think that a workman might be ashamed (cf. Rom. 1:16). Although the idea of shame is significant in 1:8–16, this is a different context, for there is no suggestion that this workman might be ashamed of his product, that is, the gospel. Rather, the following clause indicates that it is the *way* the work is performed that might or might not give reason for shame. This work is described in the word “correctly handles” (*orthotomeo*; lit., “cut straight”). Recent reference works and commentaries tend to agree that the cutting imagery is less important than the idea of correctness. The only other biblical use of this verb is in the LXX (Prov. 3:6; 11:5), where it refers to making a straight path.

Verse 16 deals once again with the activities of the false teachers. Verse 14 had warned against useless, destructive quarreling, verse 15 urged a correct handling of the truth, and verse 16 counsels against “godless chatter” (see comments on 1 Tim. 6:20). This empty talk is devoid of religious value and consequently leads “into more and more impiety” (NRSV). Such talk is to be avoided, and there will be a progression downward toward ungodliness (a sarcastic statement). In contrast, 1 Timothy 4:15 describes true progress in godliness (using a similar word).

The sentence continues in verse 17 with a second reason for avoiding the godless chatter. “Their” refers to the false teachers. “Teaching” is *logos*, with the use of that word standing in strong contrast to “the word [*logos*] of truth” in verse 15. “Will spread like gangrene” is a mixed metaphor. “Spread” denotes the opportunity to expand; the word “gangrene,” while accurate, expresses the idea not of the growth of foreign cells (such as with “cancer,” NLT) but the progress of tissue decay.

Of the two false teachers named in verse 17, Hymenaeus was mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:20 (see comments), while Philetus is mentioned only here. The word translated “wandered away” (*astocheo*) occurs in 1 Timothy 1:6; 6:21, but a different word is so translated in 6:10. The imagery of the word used here is not that of a person inadvertently wandering off a path, but of deviating from what is good or true. Their error is in saying “that the resurrection has already taken place.” This refers to the future resurrection, which is like that of Jesus and not just a spiritual transformation (1 Cor. 15:35–49).

This issue may seem unimportant, on which, like some other eschatological issues, room can be left open for debate. Yet this is an error that has negative implications regarding the bodily resurrection of Christ. It seems to value Hellenistic ideas opposed to the biblical celebration of body and soul together, and it may draw on negative pre-Gnostic ideas about the material world, including the human body. The seriousness of this error was, therefore, probably not only in the surface teaching but in the underlying assumptions and their view of what we would call biblical theology. Because of the implications of their teachings, they not only led some people astray, but actually destroyed their faith (v. 18).

Verse 19 responds to this upsetting situation with the affirmation that “God’s solid foundation stands firm.” This verse could lose some of its force if we attempt to analyze the metaphors too closely. For example: Does *themelios* mean specifically a foundation or, more generally, the beginning stages of construction? Does the fact that solidity is important mean

that Paul had the biblical stone imagery in mind (Isa. 28:16; Matt. 21:42; 1 Peter 2:6–8)? Did his occupation with household codes cause him to move from thoughts about members of the household to the “house” itself? Is he thinking of the foundation of the apostles and prophets as in Ephesians 2:20 and the structure that “grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (2:21–22, NRSV)? Or is 1 Corinthians 3:10–17 his point of reference, where Christ himself is the foundation?

And what are we to do with the word “seal,” a strange word to use in connection with a foundation, since it usually refers to the soft wax that was applied to scrolls and other documents and impressed with a signet ring? Apparently Paul is referring to an inscription and using the term *seal* as an overlapping metaphor because it conveys the idea of ownership. The next verse refers to “a large house,” another building metaphor probably connected with, and therefore perhaps affecting the interpretation of, the foundation in verse 19.

Scripture verses and extrabiblical citations can be introduced in support of each of the foregoing options. Once we have collected the evidence, however, it is probably best to see that Paul is not singling out one description to the exclusion of others, but rather merging several images to convey the idea of that which (1) is absolutely firm, (2) is owned by God, and (3) stands in spite of the presence of destructive persons like Hymenaeus and Philetus. God does, after all, own the building. The concepts of God’s household, the church, the pillar, and the foundation have already been blended together in 1 Timothy 3:15.

The seal or inscription on God’s solid foundation expresses two complementary truths. The confusion introduced by the heretical teachers and defections among the people are countered by the fact that “the Lord knows those who are his.” Yet although God knows, we do not. Therefore, “everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.” Each of these affirmations has roots in other Scriptures. The first quotation is from Numbers 16:5, about Korah and others who were rebelling against Moses. **It was necessary that God indicate who truly belonged to him and, as it turned out, that process judged the pretenders.** The second quotation contains elements of Leviticus 24:16; Joshua 23:7; Job 36:10; Isaiah 26:13; 52:11 (cf. Luke 13:27; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). It may be that Numbers 16:26–27, which described separation from the tents of Korah and his associates, whose judgment was imminent, is also in mind.³

Bridging the Gap

A CHANGE IN THE SYMPHONY. The powerful exhortations to Timothy about diligence and faithfulness (2:1–13) take an unexpected turn in this passage. Like a movement in a symphony that suddenly leads the hearer from a pleasing, coherent theme to a related yet new aural sensation, perhaps in the jarring notes of the brass section, Paul grammatically joins two different, yet related, themes in verse 14. He combines a reference to what has preceded

³ Liefeld, W. L. (1999). [*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*](#) (pp. 256–262). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

("keep reminding them of these things") with the surprising command, "Warn them before God against quarreling about words."

What seems even more surprising is that the command appears at first to be less important than the previous instructions. What, after all, is so important about quarrels concerning mere words compared with the powerful images of soldier, athlete, and farmer (2:1–7), the ringing doctrinal affirmation about Christ in 2:8, and the trustworthy saying about faithfulness to the Lord (2:10–13)? Moreover, the following verse (v. 15) contains the frequently quoted saying about proper handling of the word of truth. What, then, is the significance of and justification for the intrusion of this trumpet blast of what seems to be a minor theme in the symphony of chapter 2?

This question relates to the fact that Paul is obviously more concerned in these letters with how to handle doctrinal controversy than in explaining the intricacies of the doctrinal deviations themselves. Not that the content of heresy is unimportant; if that had been the case, these letters need not have been written. It is rather that Timothy, aware of the doctrinal issues, needs a reminder of their seriousness and how to deal with them and with their advocates rather than detailed treatment of their content.

On handling controversy. Paul does provide enough comment on the specific errors for Timothy to explain them to the Ephesians (and Titus to the Cretans), who are, as it were, looking over his shoulder at the correspondence. What Timothy, Titus, the elders, and the household churches need to know is how to keep these doctrinal controversies and their promulgators from tearing apart the churches. This concern over how to handle damaging controversies fits in with Paul's insistence on the Lord's servants maintaining a purity of life consistent with their purity of doctrine. In turn all this combines to hallow God's name and uphold his reputation.

This situation may be compared with the problem of how to dispose of napalm left over after the Vietnam war. There was no question about the content and danger of this substance. The question was how and where it could be safely transported and safely disposed of without exploding and the consequent spreading of this extremely hazardous material. That in itself resulted in a heated and "explosive" controversy.

If Timothy allows himself to be drawn into heated debates over minutia, he will be distracted from major concerns, be at risk of taking the low road of merely human argumentation, and be exposed to possible loss of respect from others. Such discussions are fruitless anyway and, worse, will "ruin those who listen" (v. 14). Paul also speaks of the "godless chatter" of the false teachers, and although their teaching will spread, the implication is that Timothy is unable to contain it by engaging in controversy on their level and, in fact, may actually contribute to its dispersion. The advice Paul gives recalls some of the wisdom in the book of Proverbs:

Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult.... Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still.
(Prov. 9:7, 9)

A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, a man of understanding is even-tempered. (17:27)

Do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words. (23:9)

Do not answer a fool according to his folly. (26:4)

There is an alternation in verses 14–19 that helps the reader get the full force of Paul's positive instructions:

- (1) Some get into quarrels about words. Avoid that.
It ruins others.
- (2) On your part be a good workman,
with no cause for shame,
handling the word of truth correctly.
- (3) Some become involved in godless chatter. Avoid that also.
The false teaching destroys others.
- (4) On God's part his foundation stands firm.
He knows who are his.
His people should turn away from wickedness.

This structure enables us to see divisive argumentation and false teaching from God's point of view. We can see its effect and how to counter it. Wrong doctrine wrongly taught needs to be countered by true doctrine correctly taught—and lived. God's foundation is firm and in no danger of toppling. God's knowledge is certain; we cannot deceive him. We should make sure that our outward behavior corresponds to our true relationship with God.

Living in God's household. The passage goes on in verses 20–21 to use the illustration of a household—an appropriate one considering that the Pastoral Letters address God's people as a household. In this case the household is not identified as the church, but Paul simply builds on the available image. Nevertheless, those from whom Christians should “cleanse [themselves]” are probably in the professing church. This is a crucial issue, for various groups and cults have used these verses to justify their separation from other believers to form independent churches, organizations, or movements. There is no call here for Christians to separate from each other, but rather it is a call for those who hold to the truth and live it to dissociate themselves from those who are evil in teaching and living. The result should be greater usefulness to the Lord.

The vocabulary describing the persons who do this is significant. They are useful for “noble purposes,” in contrast to the articles in the illustration that are for filth and excrement. The word “noble” has to do with doing what is honorable. The person who cleanses himself or herself is “made holy.” Christians are saints, God's holy ones. Such a person also becomes “useful to the Master,” which recalls the right God has, like a potter, to mold us as he chooses in order for us to serve him in the most appropriate way. We are thus prepared to do “good works” (see also 3:17; 2 Cor. 9:8; Eph. 2:10; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:10). The separation from the dishonorable articles is thus not the conclusive act; it must be followed by the changes in being and function.

Verses 22–26 begin with a restatement of the kind of person God wants us to be, but now without the imagery of the household articles and their functions. In verse 22 Paul speaks forthrightly in unmistakable terms about the moral characteristics God expects in Timothy and all believers. Significantly, this leads directly into an amplification of the instructions in verses 14 and 16 and deals with “foolish and stupid arguments” and “quarrels.” Here it becomes clear

that in addition to the previously given reasons for appropriate attitudes in the face of arguments, there is a practical goal. The servant of the Lord who does not quarrel but instead is kind will be able to teach others and perhaps see them repent, come to a “knowledge of the truth,” “come to their senses,” and “escape from the trap of the devil.” It is sobering to realize that if the attitude of the Lord’s servant makes these results possible, the opposite is also true: A wrong attitude on our part may, in spite of correct teaching, hinder others from coming to Christ.⁴

Contemporary Significance

ON DEALING WITH those who are not Christians. Fred Heeren, author of *Show Me God*, has engaged in stimulating dialogues with scientists with a secular viewpoint. He recently said, “If I’ve found any one thing to be key in getting through to skeptics today, this is it ... *Have an attitude of gentleness and respect toward unbelievers and their views*. Put negatively, the greatest single turn-off for skeptics is the Christian who sets up an us-versus-them argument between Christianity and science.” While the setting is different from that of the early church with its conflicts, this is good advice that accords with what Paul has been telling Timothy about his attitudes to those with whom he disagrees.

Another writer observes:

When people on the streets are asked, What is a Christian? What do they stand for?, on nearly every occasion words come back such as anti-abortion, anti-gay, anti-feminist, anti-welfare, anti-this, anti-that. And words like harsh, self-righteous, intolerant, or mean-spirited. Yet another poll of people, asked what they think Jesus was like, almost universally returns with words like compassionate, nonviolent peacemaker, and reconciler. How do we explain the contradictions here? Either the popular conception of Jesus is mistaken, or we in the church have been following the wrong agenda.

Second Timothy 2:14–26, like the rest of the Pastoral Letters, leaves no doubt that Paul was anti-heresy and anti-godlessness, but the point of this passage is that Timothy should not be argumentative and quarrelsome in his attitude, as the false teachers were. In this life we will always need to take some stands that are “anti,” but the issue is whether we can do this in a way that will not involve us in sub-Christian quarreling, producing a sub-Christian reputation.

Some years ago a church attempted to apply this passage from 2 Timothy to their own situation. A small group had been started in an area that could benefit from a warm, gospel-preaching, Bible-teaching church. The pieces, so to speak, were all in place. The participants were well-taught Christians. They loved the Lord, devoted themselves to worship in a spirit and to a depth not usually seen in evangelical churches in those days, and had a desire to reach

⁴ Liefeld, W. L. (1999). [*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*](#) (pp. 262–265). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

others for Christ. There was a good diversity in ages, and they fit well socially into the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, they were so intense in trying to follow what they thought was the teaching of this passage that they lacked the positive attitude toward others that it also taught, which could have produced the effects envisioned in verses 25–26. They were unable to achieve such goals because of a pre-occupation with being separate from all those who did not agree with their doctrine at every point, including spiritually minded, Bible-believing Christians. Other nearby churches held most of their doctrines and had similar views of church polity, ministry, and worship. But for this group, cleansing themselves from the unclean articles in the household meant separation even from those sister churches. Only God knows what might have been accomplished and what people might have been won to the Lord by a winsome, open, and kindly attitude toward others.

Two personal illustrations. For another application, I might offer a personal illustration. Years ago I had the opportunity to take some doctoral courses in a major liberal seminary. This took place at a crucial time in American fundamentalism. Some of the more strident voices in fundamentalism were making it difficult for others, equally fundamental in their beliefs, to hold meaningful conversations with those of a different persuasion. Some of their attitudes and argumentation were close to what this passage warns against. In this climate I, for one, found it hard to explain my beliefs to others at the seminary. I had no disagreement with the essential doctrines of fundamentalism, but the personal attacks by others of my theological position on some of the very people I was then meeting and appreciating at the seminary made it difficult to represent conservative theology to them.

However, at one point I had the privilege of facilitating an invitation to New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce, who was visiting in the area, to speak in the seminary chapel. He began with words close to these: “It does not matter what we think the apostle Paul might have said, or what we wish he had said. What matters is what, in fact, he did say.” Bruce then proceeded in a clear, gentle way to present a biblical message on the heart of Pauline theology.

Perhaps a second illustration will be useful. From time to time openings present themselves to have public debate, personal dialogue, or correspondence with prominent opponents of the Christian faith. (I still keep a letter from atheist Madeline Murray O’Hare in response to something I once wrote her.) One Christian apologist had opportunities to debate her and others of similar persuasions. After one such appearance, some were troubled by his combative, demeaning attitude to the antagonist. His response was, “I did not go there to save souls but to destroy a heretic.” I believe the apostle Paul would have hoped rather to destroy heresy and save a soul.

Fruitful dialogue. Contemporary application of this emphasis in our passage should not be difficult if we share Paul’s goals. It will always be more difficult to separate from those whose life and teachings are destructive if we know them personally than if they are merely names to us. Yet it should make us more concerned for them personally, and we can hope for an eventual turnaround if we do know them. In the house church setting Timothy must have had firsthand contact, perhaps weekly for a period of time, with the very people Paul warns him about.

In what circumstances, then, can we best engage in fruitful dialogue? There are forums that provide an open hearing for differing theological and biblical viewpoints, some involving participants from non-Christian religious and various philosophical perspectives. One thinks of

the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, but there are major societies in other disciplines also that relate to religion. Disagreement is expected and, if it is courteous and reasoned, it is respected. Such dialogue allows for dissemination of one's viewpoints as they may legitimately arise from the presentations and discussions, though one must not misuse the scholarly forms for confrontational evangelism.

On the local church scene, pastors and others may be involved in ministerial gatherings with ministers, priests, and perhaps rabbis, where, in a friendly setting, there can be an "appreciative inquiry" (to borrow a happy phrase) of other faiths. Without attacking others or questioning their integrity (which I have unfortunately heard done), a clear testimony is appropriate.

When, however, we are confronted with outright heresy by "wolves" seeking to destroy the flock and to tear a church away from its theological moorings, the rules change, and the Lord's servant should not get sucked into banter or debate. When the lines are drawn and the life of the flock is at stake, truth must confront error as openly and as forcefully as necessary.⁵

WARN THEM ABOUT FALSE TEACHING

Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, (2:14a)

Paul's purpose was to motivate and encourage Timothy to keep a firm grasp on that truth himself and to pass it on to others who would do likewise (2:2). It is only with a thorough knowledge of God's truth that falsehood and deceit can be recognized, resisted, and opposed.

For that reason Paul introduces this passage about false teaching with **Remind them of these things**. As mentioned in the previous commentary chapter, **remind** translates an imperative, as do many other verbs in 2 Timothy 2, e.g., "be strong" (v. 1), "entrust" (v. 2), and "consider" (v. 7), "be diligent" (v. 15), "avoid" (v. 16), and "abstain" (v.19). Because of the present tense in the Greek, **remind** carries the further idea of persistence.

Them refers to the whole congregation at Ephesus as well as to the "faithful men" mentioned in 2:2. **Things** refers to that about which he has just been speaking in this chapter, namely, the *positive* responsibility to pass on God's truth to others, who will, in turn, pass it on to still others; to work diligently in the Lord's work like a soldier, athlete, and farmer; to remember that Jesus is alive, risen from the dead; and to remind them of Christ's preeminence, the power of God's Word, and the purpose of His work. The call is to continually preach the truth, sound doctrine, so that it cannot be forgotten (cf. Titus 2:1, 15).

⁵ Liefeld, W. L. (1999). [*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*](#) (pp. 265–267). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Peter was committed to this very duty, as he expresses in his second letter:

Therefore, I shall always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you. And I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you may be able to call these things to mind. (2 Peter 1:12–15)

Beginning with verse 14, the apostle focuses on Timothy's *negative* responsibility to oppose and correct false teaching in the church. Timothy was to **solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless.**

Diamarturomai (**solemnly charge**) is a strong verb, here used as an imperative participle, which carries the idea of stern warning. The seriousness of the admonition is made clear first of all because it intensifies still further Paul's forceful command at the beginning of this verse to remember and, second, because the warning is to be given **in the presence of God**. God is always present, of course, and He is never unaware of what His children are doing. But because of the profound danger of false teaching, Paul wanted to make sure that Timothy and those he admonished were consciously and continually aware of **the presence of God**. Being specially aware of God's presence adds a measure of healthy fear of the Lord and therefore of increased determination to serve Him faithfully.

Paul used the phrase "in the presence of God" twice in his first letter to Timothy (5:21; 6:13). He uses it again in this letter, saying, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God," and then strengthens the charge by adding, "and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:1).

Sometimes in Scripture the phrase "the presence of God" is used to comfort believers. Nearing death, Isaac implored Esau, "Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the Lord before my death" (Gen. 27:7). In his grand psalm of victory, David rejoiced, "O God, when Thou didst go forth before Thy people, when Thou didst march through the wilderness, the earth quaked; the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel" (Ps. 68:7–8). Reassuring Zacharias about the birth of John the Baptist, the angel said, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news" (Luke 1:19). To a crowd of Jews outside the Temple shortly after Pentecost, Peter implored, "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). The writer of Hebrews assures us of Christ's appearing in heaven on our behalf "in the presence of God" (Heb. 9:24).

But in most cases, "the presence of the Lord" has to do with God's severity, often in judgment. Near the beginning of the psalm quoted above, David exclaims, "As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish before God" (Ps. 68:2; cf. 97:5; 114:7). When Christ returns in judgment, unbelievers "will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:9).

In view of the presence of the eternal God, Paul solemnly charges the church at Ephesus **not to wrangle about words, which is useless**. As becomes clear in the following verses, Paul was

not speaking about immature wrangling over secondary matters, disruptive as that can be. *Logomacheō* (**wrangle about words**) carries the idea of waging a war of words, in this instance with false teachers, who are later described as “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). Such deceivers use human wisdom and reason to undermine God’s Word, and believers are not to debate with them, especially within the church.

Even from a human perspective, it is obvious that no debate can be carried on effectively when the two sides argue from completely opposite and contradictory presuppositions. Unbelievers put no stock in the divine authority of God’s Word, and believers should put no stock in the presumed authority of men’s words. No matter how biblically sound their arguments may be in themselves, Christians who debate with unbelievers inadvertently allow Scripture to be considered on the same level as human wisdom.

To discuss interpretations of Scripture and doctrine with other believers who recognize the Bible as God’s inerrant and authoritative Word is important when it is done in a spirit of humility and civility and is an honest attempt to grasp the truth. In the early days of the church, the Jerusalem Council was called to settle a dispute about the circumcision of believers (See Acts 15). Throughout church history, equally godly believers have differed on certain points of doctrine, as they still do today. But to argue doctrine with someone who disdains Scripture is both futile and foolish.

In his fictional but spiritually insightful *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has an older demon give a junior demon named Wormwood the following advice about tempting a certain human being who has been assigned to him: “Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn’t think of doctrines as primarily ‘true’ or ‘false,’ but as ‘academic’ or ‘practical.’ ... Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church” ([New York: Macmillan, 1961], 8).

Satan does indeed know that most people, including many who are intelligent and well-educated, are more apt to be persuaded by popular jargon than by biblical argument or actual proof—despite what they may claim to the contrary. In the last several centuries, the most unbiblical, humanistic, and destructive philosophies have come through channels of higher education, including many colleges, universities, and seminaries that claim to be Christian, and once were. Human intelligence has never been a match for the wiles of Satan. The sinful pride of man is nowhere more clearly seen than in exalting his own intellect over Scripture and in considering such utter foolishness to be scholarship. Many undiscerning students line up to learn from these pseudoscholars and have the strength of any remaining convictions turned into weakness.

The barrage of ungodly ideas and verbiage that today is assaulting society in general, and even the evangelical church, is frightening. More frightening than the false ideas themselves, however, is the indifference to them, and often acceptance of them, by those who name the name of Christ and claim to be born again. Abortion, theistic evolution, homosexuality, no fault divorce, feminism, and many other unbiblical concepts and attitudes have invaded the church at an alarming rate and to an alarming degree. One of the most popular and seductive false teachings is the promotion of high self-esteem as a Christian virtue, when, in reality, it is the very foundation of sin. Such destructive notions are inevitable when Christians listen to the

world above the Word, and are more persuaded by men's wisdom than by God's. Far too few leaders in the church today can say honestly with Paul that their "exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit" (1 Thess. 2:3).

As Christians become less and less familiar with Scripture and sound doctrine on a firsthand, regular basis, they become easy prey for jargon that sounds Christian but strongly mitigates against God's truth. Such unbiblical and arbitrary ideas as being "slain in the Spirit" and "binding Satan" frequently replace or are valued above the clear teaching of and submission to Scripture.

Whatever the specific doctrinal errors were that threatened the church at Ephesus, they obviously were serious. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul warned that "the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). Doubtless some of those demonic doctrines already were corrupting the church there.

In any case, Paul gives six specific reasons for avoiding and opposing *all* false teaching: it ruins the hearers (2:14b), it brings shame on the teacher (v. 15), it leads to ungodliness (v. 16), it spreads rapidly (v. 17a), it upsets the faith of some (vv. 17b–18), and it characterizes those who do not belong to the Lord (v. 19).

FALSE TEACHING RUINS THE HEARERS

and leads to the ruin of the hearers. (2:14b)

The first and most obvious harm of false teaching is the damage it does to those who hear it. It puts an obstacle in the way of unbelievers, who may be turned away from the true way of salvation. It also does harm to believers, by causing confusion, doubt, discouragement, and disobedience.

As one might guess, *katastrophē* (**ruin**) is the word from which we get *catastrophe*. False teaching has a catastrophic effect. The Greek word has the basic idea of being overturned or overthrown, and in this context it carries the more explicit connotation of being spiritually ruined. Paul is talking about teaching that intentionally subverts the truth by replacing it with falsehood. Consequently, instead of building up the hearers, it tears them down; instead of bringing enrichment, it brings disaster.

The only other use of that Greek word in the New Testament is found in Peter's second epistle, where its extreme seriousness is even clearer. "[God] condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction [*katastrophē*] by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter" (2 Peter 2:6). In that epistle Peter confronts false teaching which, by that time, was perverting God's truth and ruining its hearers throughout the world. Those "untaught and unstable" men distorted Paul's teaching, just as they did "the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:15–16). Even more dangerous, however, were the "false teachers among [them in the church], who [would] secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1).

FALSE TEACHING BRINGS SHAME ON THE TEACHERS

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. (2:15)

Paul's second warning about false teaching is by means of contrast. Contrary to such perverters of God's truth as those mentioned by Peter, Timothy was to **be diligent to present [himself] approved to God**.

Spoudazō (To **be diligent**) carries the idea of having zealous persistence to accomplish a particular objective. The **diligent** believer—in this context, the **diligent** teacher—gives maximum effort to impart God's truth as completely, as clearly, and as unambiguously as possible. He gives unreserved commitment to excellence in examining, interpreting, explaining, and applying God's Word. It is for that reason that "elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

The purpose of that diligence is not to please others, and certainly not to please oneself, but to **present yourself approved to God**. *Paristēmi* (to **present yourself**) literally means to stand alongside of. The idea in this passage is that of standing alongside of or before God, of presenting oneself for inspection, as it were, in order to be approved by Him. *Dokimos* (**approved**) refers to favorably passing careful scrutiny and thereby being counted worthy.

The supreme purpose of the diligent and selfless teacher is to please God. "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God?" Paul asked Galatian believers. "Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). Every Christian teacher and preacher should be able to say, "Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts" (1 Thess. 2:4). His greatest desire is to hear his Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21). Such a teacher or preacher is **a workman who does not need to be ashamed**.

The clear implication, especially in light of the following three verses, is that false teachers, on the other hand, have great reason to **be ashamed**. One dictionary defines **shame** as "a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety." Another states that it is "the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of having done something dishonorable." Therefore, unlike a teacher who stands **as a workman who does not need to be ashamed**, a teacher who propagates falsehood, especially in the name of God and under the guise of Christianity, *ought* to be ashamed (cf. 1 John 2:28).

It is obvious, though, that those who have the most reason to be ashamed are the most shameless. They are among those Paul speaks of in his letter to the Philippian church: "For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and *whose glory is in their shame*, who set their minds on earthly things" (Phil. 3:18–19, emphasis added). Those who persist in perverting the gospel are no less than "enemies of Christ." The most damning indictment of them is from the pen of Jude, who calls them "hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea,

casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 12–13).

It is clear from both the Old and New Testaments, as well as from church history and our own time, that many of the worst false teachers claim to be servants of God. The majority of scribes, Pharisees, and other Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day considered themselves to be the godliest of the godly, as well as the only reliable interpreters of Scripture. Yet Jesus said of them, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

Even apart from those extremes, *anyone* who ignores, misrepresents, misinterprets, or detracts from God’s truth by adding to it or taking away from it (Rev. 22:18–19) has reason to be ashamed as well as fearful. Whether consciously or not, those who corrupt and denigrate God’s truth are the spiritual children of Satan. They are purveyors of his abominable lies and are under God’s sovereign and certain judgment.

The mark of a faithful teacher or preacher is his **handling accurately the word of truth**. **Handling accurately** translates a participle of *orthotomeō*, which means literally to cut straight. It was used of a craftsman cutting a straight line, of a farmer plowing a straight furrow, of a mason setting a straight line of bricks, or of workmen building a straight road. Metaphorically, it was used of carefully performing any task. Because Paul was a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3), he may have had in mind the careful, straight cutting and sewing of the many pieces of leather or cloth necessary to make a tent.

Sometimes in the New Testament, the phrase **word of truth**, or message of truth, refers specifically to the gospel. Paul reminded believers in Ephesus, “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5). James speaks of the Father’s exercising His will in bringing “us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures” (James 1:18). Many other references to God’s **truth** refer to the full revelation of His Word in Scripture. Jesus doubtless had this broad meaning in mind when He prayed to His Father on our behalf, “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). In any case, Paul’s point here is the same. Every aspect of God’s **truth** is to be handled **accurately**, as a sacred trust by those who teach it and by those who hear it.

The careful exegete and expositor of God’s word of truth must be meticulous in the way he interprets and pieces together the many individual truths found in Scripture. The first and most important principle is that of basing doctrine and standards of living on Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), a key watchword of the Protestant Reformation.

Because the Bible is God’s inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, and sole source of His divine **word of truth**, every other truth rests on that **truth**. It is not that the inerrancy of Scripture is a more important truth than, say, the deity of Christ or the Trinity. But it is only from the **truth** of Scripture that we can know all other truths. God’s **word of truth** in Scripture is the source and measure not only of all spiritual and moral truth but of all truth of *any sort* on which it speaks.

In explaining, and evidently trying to justify, the conception of his first child out of wedlock, a prominent evangelical leader maintained that true marriage with his wife began at that time, rather than at the time of their wedding. That claim, of course, utterly contradicts what

Scripture teaches about the unconditional sinfulness of fornication. When the man's wife was asked how she felt about that "indiscretion" being made public, she added to her husband's twisting of Scripture by responding, "Well, now I understand the meaning of John 8:23, 'the truth shall make you free.' " The most cursory look at that passage reveals that Jesus was not speaking about the feeling of relief that often comes with having a sin justified. He was speaking about the truth of His divinity and messiahship. He was speaking "to those Jews who had believed Him," explaining that their knowing and being made free by that truth was conditioned on their abiding in His Word, which would mark them as "truly [His] disciples" (v. 31).

Equally blasphemous was a young woman who posed nude for a pornographic magazine and said the experience had drawn her closer to God. She even claimed the scriptural promise "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). The arrogant folly of her statement is made clear in the next half of that verse, which commands: "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

It is one thing to genuinely repent of a sin and to have the assurance of God's forgiveness. It is a different thing entirely to twist God's Word in an effort to justify the sin. It is one thing for an unbeliever, who makes no claim of godliness, to be unashamed of a sin. It is quite another thing, and immeasurably worse, for a person who claims salvation to be unashamed of a sin, especially when God's Word is used to defend it.

FALSE TEACHING LEADS TO UNGODLINESS

But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, (2:16)

A third danger of false teaching is its leading to ungodliness. **But** indicates the contrast of "handling accurately the word of truth" with the warning to **avoid worldly and empty chatter**. Such talk should not be "handled" at all.

Paul gave similar advice to Titus: "Shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law; for they are unprofitable and worthless" (Titus 3:9). The apostle had given Timothy such advice earlier, adding the warning to also avoid "the opposing arguments of what is falsely called 'knowledge' " (1 Tim. 6:20). That sort of talk is time wasting and confusing at best and spiritually harmful at worst, which obviously is what Paul has in mind here. Words of **worldly** human opinion are no more than evil **chatter**.

Paul is not talking of idle chitchat or gossip, which can do considerable damage in a church. He is speaking of destructive heresy that perverts divine truth and **will lead to further ungodliness**. The chatter itself is evil enough, but when it infects the hearers, the evil is compounded.

This danger is not restricted to unbelievers or even immature believers. Paul is speaking directly to Timothy, who, despite his timidity and temporary discouragement, was nevertheless a gifted spiritual leader in whom the apostle had much confidence. He had been appointed leader as the official representative of Paul in the church at Ephesus. No one is exempt from the corruptive influence of falsehood. Just as a doctor cannot help being exposed to a dangerous disease he is treating, a godly preacher or teacher cannot help being exposed to dangerous

ideas. But just as a doctor keeps exposure to the minimum and concentrates on destroying the disease, so the godly preacher or teacher must keep exposure to falsehood at a minimum, while opposing and seeking to exterminate it with the truth.

When false teachers are unopposed or unexposed, “many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned” (2 Peter 2:2). The spiritual plight of many denominations and Christian institutions that once were solidly biblical is abundant proof of the pernicious and pervasive destructiveness of false doctrine. The legacy of false doctrine is the **further ungodliness** of false living. Error cannot restrain the flesh, cannot halt the devil, and cannot protect from the world. False teaching provides no defense against iniquity and no strength for doing what is right and God-honoring.

FALSE TEACHING SPREADS RAPIDLY

and their talk will spread like gangrene. (2:17a)

Not only that, but false doctrine propagated by the **talk** of false teachers **will spread** its infection **like gangrene**. **Gangrene** transliterates *gangraina*, the Greek word from which it is derived. In the ancient world, the term was used of cancer as well as gangrene, both of which diseases **spread** rapidly and are deadly. Even in modern warfare, **gangrene** is one of the worst dangers in battlefield injuries. If not treated promptly and carefully, it can quickly lead to amputation or death. False religion and satanic lies spread faster than the truth, because the sinful human heart is more receptive to them.

Religious deceptions are so infectious, malicious, and insidious that they are to be handled only with protective mask and gloves, as it were. Using another figure, Jude says that those who are in grave spiritual danger should be snatched “out of the fire” (Jude 23) like a hot ember. It was in a similar figurative way that the high priest Joshua, who had become corrupted like the rest of the priesthood, was divinely retrieved and spared, like “a brand plucked from the fire” (Zech. 3:2).

“The whole world lies in the power of the evil one,” John says in his first letter (1 John 5:19). Earlier in that epistle he says we are not to “love the world, nor the things in the world,” because “if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world” (2:15–16). James likewise warns, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). The world is the partner with demons in developing and spreading the epidemic of deadly spiritual gangrene.

It is because false teachers are of the world and serve the prince of this world that they are so dangerous. And rapidly growing technology has helped worldliness and every other form of ungodliness to also grow more rapidly, exposing more people to more evil teaching than those who lived even a few generations ago could have imagined. Consequently, Christians today have more reason than ever to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). “They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them” (v. 5). Christians

therefore have no excuse even for listening to them, much less buying into their ungodly beliefs and ways.

FALSE TEACHING UPSETS THE FAITH OF SOME

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some. (2:17b–18)

Paul identifies one of the false teachers as **Hymenaeus**, who, because he was denounced in the previous letter, obviously had been a threat to the Ephesian church for some time. Although Paul had put him out of the church when he himself was still in Ephesus, having “delivered [him] over to Satan,” **Hymenaeus** obviously persisted in his efforts to mislead believers there, **and Philetus** had replaced Alexander as his co-conspirator (See 1 Tim. 1:20).

Those men were apostates, like those of whom the writer of Hebrews wrote: “In the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame” (Heb. 6:4–6). They have “trampled under foot the Son of God, and [have] regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which [they were] sanctified, and [have] insulted the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29). As Jesus said of Judas (Matt. 26:24), it would have been better if those men had not been born.

The particular heresy of **Hymenaeus and Philetus** was their claiming **that the resurrection [had] already taken place** (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12). Paul does not explain what resurrection they had in mind. Neither Jesus’ resurrection (Which had occurred) nor the physical resurrection of believers (Which had not yet occurred) makes sense in this context. It seems probable, therefore, that these men propounded some form of spiritual resurrection as the only resurrection. Perhaps they taught that the only resurrection was the spiritual union with Christ in His death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:1–11). Such a view would have been based on pagan Greek philosophy, perhaps incipient gnosticism, whose adherents believed that the body and all other material things are intrinsically evil. Some of the Greeks of Athens who sneered “when they heard [Paul speak] of the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 17:32) were doubtless into such philosophical dualism and were horrified at the idea of the body’s being restored in the afterlife. **Hymenaeus and Philetus** possibly held the belief of many pagans that the only immortality is in life carried on through one’s progeny. By denying bodily resurrection, they were destroying the very foundation of the Christian faith—denying both the reality and the implications of Christ’s resurrection.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul makes clear the monumental importance of both Christ’s and the believer’s resurrection and of a right understanding of those truths. “If there is no resurrection of the dead,” Paul says, “not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ,

whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised,... and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:13–15, 17).

To deny or distort the truth about the **resurrection** is to deny and distort the heart of the gospel. It is therefore a tragic and damnable thing to teach falsehood about that doctrine. Not only does it blaspheme God and denigrate His Word but inevitably it will **upset the faith of some**.

Anatrepō (To **upset**) carries the idea of overturning or over throwing, indicating that the **faith** held by **some** of those who listened to false teachers was not saving faith, which cannot be overthrown or destroyed. Those hearers apparently had heard the gospel and been attracted to Christianity as a possible answer to their religious quest. But because they had not placed their **faith** in Christ as Savior and Lord and were exposed to deception, they fell prey to corrupt teaching and remained lost.

Again, that sad truth reveals one of the greatest perils of a false gospel: It keeps **some** souls—over the centuries, countless millions of them—out of the kingdom.

FALSE TEACHING CHARACTERIZES THOSE WHO DO NOT BELONG TO THE LORD

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness."
(2:19)

The last danger of false teaching mentioned here is that it fits those who are unsaved and ungodly.

Paul again makes his point by contrast. **Nevertheless**, he continues, **the firm foundation of God stands**. Unlike those who trust in a satanic scheme of religion, those who are truly saved, who are God's spiritual children and genuine disciples of Jesus Christ, are part of **the firm foundation of God**.

In this context, **the firm foundation of God** seems most likely to refer to the church. In the previous letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the *pillar and support* of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15, emphasis added). The **foundation** of Christ's church **stands** on the truth, "and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18).

On that promise, we have God's seal. A *sphragis* (**seal**) was a sign of ownership, and **God** has placed His divine **seal** of ownership on the church. In the end times, those "who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" will be tormented by the locusts (Rev. 9:4). It is also doubtless that God's seal on their foreheads will protect believers from taking the mark of the beast (See Rev. 13:16).

God's **seal** of ownership is on the church in two ways. First, every member of the body of Christ, the church, has God's divine assurance of election, in that **"the Lord knows those who are His."** The source of this quotation is not certain, but is possibly from the book of Numbers. When some Israelites were about to rebel against the Lord and His appointed leaders Moses and Aaron, Moses declared to Korah and the other rebels, "The Lord will show who is His, and

who is holy, and will bring him near to Himself; even the one whom He will choose, He will bring near to Himself” (Num. 16:5).

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me,” Jesus assures us; “and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27–28). Like Satan, false teachers can cause great confusion and apprehension among God’s people, but they cannot corrupt or destroy His people, because “God has chosen [us] from the beginning for salvation” (2 Thess. 2:13a).

The New Testament is replete with such guarantees. “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me,” Jesus promises, “and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:37–40). God chose us for salvation in Christ “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), and those “whom He [God] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Rom. 8:29–30).

The second way in which God has placed His **seal** on the church is through personal sanctification, personal holiness. Paul therefore says, “**Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness.**” This quotation may be adapted from the same passage in the book of Numbers, in which Moses later warned the godly: “Depart now from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be swept away in all their sin” (Num. 16:26). Those who did not separate themselves from the wicked rebels were destroyed with them when “the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up” (v. 32).

This second aspect of sanctification is both an exhortation and an affirmation. The exhortation is: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Peter likewise admonishes, “Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (1 Peter 1:15).

But our sanctification is also divinely affirmed. In the verse in 2 Thessalonians cited above, in which Paul assures believers that God has chosen them for salvation, he adds, “through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2:13b). Despite our many failures and our frequent unfaithfulness, God will graciously complete our sanctification. “For I am confident of this very thing,” Paul testified, “that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6).⁶

⁶ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1995). [*2 Timothy*](#) (pp. 68–82). Chicago: Moody Press.