

## Contrasts within the Church 2 Timothy 2:14–26

By Bruce A. McDowell

*14 Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. 16 But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, 17 and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. 19 But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."*

*20 Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. 21 Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.*

*22 So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. 23 Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. 24 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, 25 correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*

In the past few years Soulforce, a group of people who call themselves Christians, have been actively promoting the gay lifestyle and its acceptance within the church. They teach gay theology, which is a reinterpretation of the Bible that fits their agenda. They have taken the approach of having a busload of volunteers travel around the country visiting Christian college campuses to speak out on the issue, even when not allowed. They have adopted the agenda of the world rather than of Christ. Throughout history the church has been rocked by false teaching, controversies, and heretics who created division, dissension, and distraction from the centrality of Christ crucified and risen for

our salvation from sin. Today these are seen in the rise of paganism and the occult, Gnosticism and New Age philosophy, secularism and atheism, and postmodernism and Western secular philosophy influencing the interpretation of Scripture. While some are strong advocates of their views, destroying the faith of many, others are simply lost amidst the cacophony of voices as to where the truth lies. Our age is really not different from the time of Paul and Timothy in which they had to deal with such controversies.

Paul is in his second imprisonment in Rome, which leads to his eventual execution, while he wrote to Timothy his last New Testament letter. He wrote words of encouragement to Timothy, who had been his protégé and spiritual son. He encouraged him to remain strong in the gospel and to remind his flock to remain faithful despite opposition. Later in the letter he asked Timothy to come and see him in Rome. Meanwhile, Timothy is to present himself to God as an approved worker who is has no reason to be ashamed. This is to be done by rightly teaching the word of truth—that is the gospel. To rightly handle the truth is to literally cut straightly, as in cutting a furrow in the field or a straight road. We must not deviate from the truth handed down to us by the apostles who were eye witnesses of the risen Christ. One important aspect of being an approved worker is that a minister be well trained and examined concerning faithful doctrine.

## **True and False Teachers**

As Paul had earlier left Timothy in Ephesus as he went on to Macedonia, he urged him to stay there because of a problem of heretical teaching in the church (1 Tim. 1:3). In Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he already is warning them

that savage wolves will come in among them, even from among their own leaders (Acts 20:29, 30). This portion of Paul's second letter to Timothy addresses this persistent problem in the church, which was also present elsewhere, as Paul addresses similar problems in Colosse and Corinth and John addresses similar false teaching in his epistles. Paul had already addressed this problem in his first letter to Timothy. The wording of verses 14-18 indicate that the false teaching Paul is concerned about is an early form of Gnosticism. Gnostics viewed the material world as evil. Paul tells Timothy to warn the false teachers not to get involved in semantic arguments. The problem with false teaching is that often they will use the same language we who hold to the truth do, but have a completely different understanding of the terminology. One finds the same thing to be true today as one discusses the gospel with a liberal "Christian" or someone involved with one of the cults, or even in discussions with Muslims when they tell you we are almost the same, we believe in one God, and we believe in all the prophets, including Jesus. Liberal Christians often don't believe sin to be personal, but structural evil. Christ's death was for everyone as a good moral example, but not as atonement for sin of his elect. Christ's resurrection was in the hearts of the early believers that inspired them to selfless acts of love, but was not a literal act of God in history. Unless you understand the background of where they are coming from you may at first think that you are on the same page with them. But as you go deeper into their thought and the meaning they give to the words they are using, you discover that they are far from the truth. But their use of the same words confuses many people into thinking that they are in the truth or it leads others into false teaching. As Paul warns, it "only ruins those who listen." It spreads destruction like gangrene in the body. All one can do is cut it off to save the rest of the

body. Because of a similar problem in many mainline churches in our country today, we see many empty church buildings that at one time had thriving ministries. False teaching was allowed to continue; it destroyed the faith of millions; and now many of these liberal denominations are in serious decline. The gangrene has set in and is killing the body.

Paul names two leaders of this false teaching, Hymenaeus and Philetus, as having wandered from the truth. Hymenaeus is mentioned along with Alexander in Paul's first letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:20) as those who have shipwrecked their faith. Later in this second letter Paul laments that Alexander the coppersmith did him much harm, and he warns Timothy to beware of him for he greatly resisted Paul's message (2 Tim. 4:14, 15). Paul had Hymenaeus and Alexander handed over to Satan, that is, put under church discipline and outside the covenant community, so that they would learn not to blaspheme. They were blaspheming God by denying the truth of his Word and the gospel. They distorted the truth in such a way that it took the heart of the gospel away. In teaching that the resurrection has already taken place, they deny the bodily resurrection. Instead they probably taught that there is only a spiritual resurrection, such as those in the Christian Science cult believe; or that the resurrection is a spiritual initiation or quickening already experienced.<sup>1</sup> Since they believed that the physical and material was evil, they could not see how it would be resurrected to new life. Gnostics interpreted the resurrection as allegorical, not literal. For those who were seduced by such false teaching, their faith was shattered. For the gospel is based on the historical reality of the bodily resurrection of Christ and that we too will be raised to new life with a new body, just as Jesus was.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, editors, *The New Bible Commentary, revised* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 1180.

Paul addressed a similar problem when writing the Corinthians, where some denied the bodily resurrection, and therefore the bodily resurrection of Christ. He gave eight conclusions from this false assertion. “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:14–19). Paul strongly asserted the bodily resurrection of Christ, for by denying it one was denying the gospel and one was without hope, still dead in one’s sins, and without God.

Paul ends his warning with a strong note of encouragement. Despite the false teaching which leads people away from the truth, God’s solid foundation cannot be overturned. The church being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20), stands firm. His elect are sealed by two inscriptions, signifying ownership and security. This double affirmation from both God’s perspective and the human one identifies what distinguishes a genuine member of the household of God from the false. The first, that “the Lord knows those who are his,” indicates that the Lord intimately knows his own, the elect (v. 10). This is a quotation (in *Septuagint*) from Numbers 16:5, ensuring our security. The second, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness,” is an indication of our human responsibility before God. It is an inscription of what is required for membership in God’s church, confession of faith in Christ and a call to holiness—a repudiation of sin,

including that of false teaching. As the Israelites were to separate themselves completely from those associated with Korah's rebellion, lest they be destroyed with their sins (Num. 16:26; cf. Isa. 52:11), so we must confirm our identity as believers in Christ with holy living. The one who has sealed us is the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13), who empowers us for living a holy life and enlightens our minds to understand the truth of the gospel. The genuineness of someone's faith is known only to God, but we affirm the faith we profess and make our election sure by living in a God-honoring way. May we be encouraged by the security we have through our faith in Christ Jesus and may we be diligent at living a life of holiness, for without it, no one will see the Lord.

This seal on the foundation of the true church Paul wrote about seems to indicate that he viewed the false teachers as being outside of that security we have in Christ. This seems confirmed by the following metaphor concerning honorable and dishonorable vessels.

### **Vessels for Honorable and Dishonorable Purposes**

Having drawn a contrast between true and false teachers, Paul now addresses a second distinction between people in the church. Paul uses a metaphor of a large house that contains both valuable gold and silver vessels used for honorable purposes and cheap wood and clay vessels used for dishonorable purposes. He obviously is referring to the church as the large house, continuing from his previous metaphor of the church built on "God's firm foundation" in verse 19. In every church one will find people who are either useful for noble purposes or ignoble purposes. There are two main ways in which to interpret verses 20-21.

The first interpretation takes a less radical view of the dishonorable vessels. In this view the vessels used for ignoble purposes are mediocre, lazy Christians who have faith, but are not fully living the Christian life and may be confused on some doctrinal issues. They are not being all they could be in Christ's service. So their dishonorable purpose is seen as low value or menial rather than bringing dishonor to their owner. While acknowledging that Hymenaeus and Philetus are false teachers, they do not take them to be unbelievers, but simply greatly confused in their doctrinal beliefs. Verse 21 is seen as supporting this view that Christians should change from being lackadaisical about their faith to being a useful special vessel. Paul wrote, "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work." So in this view, they are to keep themselves from being contaminated by mediocre Christians who have a lukewarm testimony.<sup>2</sup>

A second interpretation, which I see as more faithful to the text, would be to see "vessels of gold and silver" and those that are "honorable" as representing true believers. Vessels of "wood and clay" for "dishonorable" use represent unbelievers. It is not speaking of those who are less gifted or less dedicated, but of seducers in the church. This is based upon Paul referring back to the false teachers, such as Hymenaeus and Philetus (vv. 16–18). Hymenaeus had "shipwrecked his faith" and both had "swerved from the truth" of the gospel, becoming apostate. They are examples of those vessels used for dishonorable purposes. We see a similar use of these words by Paul in Romans 9:21 where he says, "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" Those vessels made for

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<sup>2</sup> Harold J. Berry, *Gems from the Original, Vol. II: Studies in II Timothy* (Lincoln, Neb.: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1975), 74-76.

dishonorable use are “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,” while he makes “known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy” (vv. 22, 23). Carrying this same metaphor over to Paul’s instruction to Timothy, we see that the church has both believers and unbelievers within it, just as Jesus has indicated in his parable of the weeds sowed in the wheat field (Matt. 13). God will accomplish his electing purposes even within the visible church.

Next, Paul transitions from speaking of the church to the individual. With this interpretation of verse 20, what Paul means in verse 21 by “if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable” is that he must separate himself from false teaching, holding onto the truth, living a godly life so that “he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.” Paul is emphasizing the importance of personal holiness for every believer, not just the super-Christian, who is to be set apart for an honorable and noble task in service to our Lord. Each of us has to take personal responsibility to separate ourselves from defilement by those who profess the faith but deny its power by living and teaching what is contrary to sound doctrine. Putting up with false teaching will lead to destruction of one’s faith, denial of our Lord, and ungodly living. Timothy’s application of Paul’s instruction would likely include church discipline of the false teachers. As undisputed Master of the house, our Lord owns everything in it; so we must live with that understanding of our lives. We must prepare ourselves for complete submission without hidden agendas to serving the Master of our lives.

In many cultures outside of the West, a very clear distinction is made between vessels used for holding water for noble purposes and ignoble purposes. A cup used in



the bathroom for dipping water and then washing yourself (with your left hand) after doing your business would never be taken to the kitchen to be used for drinking purposes. It is only used for this dishonorable purpose. If the cup used for drinking that is in the cupboard in the kitchen should break, it would never be replaced by the one used in the bathroom. Rather, it would be replaced by another one used for noble purposes. This understanding of honorable and dishonorable vessels makes the distinction clearer that Paul is making between true believers and false believers in the church. So “if anyone *cleanses* himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy...” (italics mine). Remember, holiness is essential to seeing the Lord. We see here both our human responsibility and God’s sovereign purposes working themselves out together that we may be useful vessels for the Lord’s service.

## **The Kind and the Quarrelsome**

The last of the three pairs of contrasts in the church are the kind and the quarrelsome. Paul admonishes Timothy on how to develop kindness and avoid quarrelsomeness. As Frederick W. Faber said, “Kindness has converted more sinners than zeal, eloquence or learning.”<sup>3</sup>

The aged apostle begins this section saying, “So flee youthful passions.” Timothy was likely still in his early thirties. In telling him to flee, he uses a word meaning present tense continuous action. He is to *keep on* or *always* to “flee the evil desires of youth” (NIV). What are these desires or passions? They may be characterized by selfish ambition, impatience, and love of winning an argument. There is a lack of maturity in considering

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<sup>3</sup> Sherwood Eliot Wirt and Kersten Beckstrom, editors, *Living Quotations for Christians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 137.

the needs of others and respect for others. Youth often desire to live for oneself and for the moment without considering the impact on others or the future. Such people are not spiritual people, but those living according to the flesh or as carnal immature Christians or perhaps those who persist in that lifestyle are not really Christians at all.

In contrast, we are to “pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” The word for faith can also be translated “faithfulness.” Paul had earlier addressed these virtues to Timothy in his first letter saying near the beginning, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Then again near the end he admonishes Timothy to, “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness” (1 Tim. 6:11). Although Paul wrote Timothy again about his concern that the false teaching be purged out of the church, he wanted to make sure that this did not result in divisions, but rather “love and peace” in the fellowship. The pursuit of these four graces, “righteousness, faith, love, and peace,” is to be done intensely. It is to seek eternal values over temporal ones. In pursuing these eternal values, one finds deep fellowship with like-minded people who seek the Lord from a pure heart. Such people are those who have cleansed themselves to serve the Master as honorable vessels. It is a great blessing to know that we can have our hearts pure and cleansed through confession of our sin. As John wrote, “The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7-9). Having been cleansed of our sin through faith in Christ’s work of atonement on our behalf, we are prepared to be very useful vessels for the Lord’s service.

Developing these character traits while one is young is especially important. As Joel Hawes wrote, “Youth is pre-eminently the forming, fixing period, the spring season of disposition and habit; and it is during this season, more than any other, that the character assumes its permanent shape and color, and the young are wont to take their course for time and for eternity.”<sup>4</sup> Let us not wait any longer to intensely work at developing strong Christian character in our lives.

Since the church is still full of sinners who have not yet reached perfection in their process of sanctification, there continue to be those who like to quarrel about words, details, and ideas that lead to no reasonable solution, unity in the body, or greater faith. Some of these people are perhaps not yet regenerated, for their hearts are not in the right place before God. They want to be teachers, but don’t know what they are talking about. Others seem to be apparent believers, but operate out of conceit and a desire for authority over others for personal gain. They have not fully humbled themselves before the Lord, and so do not act humbly towards others.

“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness” (vv. 24, 25). Paul addresses Timothy and all believers as “the Lord’s servant” or “bondservant” or “slave of Christ” (1 Cor. 7:22), but it applies particularly to those like Timothy who are called to a special ministry, as was Paul (cf. Tit. 1:1). Taking on such a humble role, one can counter with the authority of Christ those who persist in false teaching and controversy. Those who are ensnared in these quarrels are not a lost cause. There is yet hope for them, so we must be gentle to all, patiently teach them, and humbly correct those opposed to us. So our approach with those ensnared by false teaching should be by

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 265.

positive exposition of the truth, rather than by entering into controversy with those opposed to it. Such is the approach of a Turkish pastor in Istanbul. He is not concerned about proclaiming all the apologetic answers to Islam, but rather just making the gospel clear and proclaiming it widely. As for those who deliberately stir up controversy and division, Paul advises, “after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Tit. 3:10, 11). We must pray that the Lord will grant them repentance from their pride and false assertions. The devil has set a snare to capture those who are not alert to his devices. He uses the trends in the culture to enrapture the minds of those he leads astray to thinking they are being relevant. As they interpret the faith through the filter of the prevailing culture dominated by worldliness, they go into every sort of falsehood. One example of this in our present culture is the wide acceptance of homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, even within churches. While some are open to learning the truth of God’s design for relationships, others are radical in their views, twist the use of the Scriptures, and strongly oppose the truth. Those in the latter camp must be admonished and warned, and if they do not repent, should be shunned. But never assume that anyone who is trapped in the devil’s deceptions is beyond God’s reach. Always proclaim the gospel clearly to all. By correcting your opponents with gentleness, “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.” Make Christ the focus of your message, for without him as Lord and Savior we are without hope.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the false teachings that are invading numerous churches today?
2. How should these false teachings be dealt with in an effective way?
3. What distinction is Paul making with his metaphor of honorable and dishonorable vessels?
4. What means of assurance do we have to know that we are one of the honorable vessels?
5. What approach should we take in dealing with false teachers and those who persist in causing controversy?
6. What should we pray for concerning such people? Close in prayer for those who promote controversy and false teaching and those who are under their influence.

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