

Hold Your Course

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.? (1Ti 1:18-20)

Is it possible for someone to indulge in error with a "good conscience"? It seems rather obvious that Paul viewed the two proponents of error at Ephesus to have done so. The faithful preacher should conduct his ministry from the dual vantage point of solid faith and a good conscience. No problem with these men's consciences, but Paul charges them with a shipwrecked faith. He couldn't know their conscience, but he could well know their faith. For New Testament writers, faith is not a mystical, trusting blind leap into darkness. It is more a leap out of darkness into light. It stands on the solid foundation of God's character and stated promises in Scripture, not on esoteric "revelations" or "impressions."

Paul urges Timothy to recall his original calling and ordination, the "prophecies" that went before on him. Rather than deciding that he learned a "different truth" (a façade for embraced error), Paul charges Timothy to hold that original course in which he was charged at his ordination. We may well grow in our knowledge, but we should be incredibly cautious when we consider growing "away" from established Biblical truth. In a fellowship that respects its historical roots such as mine, we must wrestle cautiously with history versus Biblical revelation. We must realize the ever-present danger of allowing history or historical beliefs and practices to supercede Scripture. "They did it a hundred years ago; that is good enough for me" is not sufficient for the Biblical model. Either we embrace Scripture alone as our rule of both faith and practice, or we don't. Rather than interpreting Scripture through our history, we should interpret our history through Scripture. Historical beliefs and practices will invariably drift, not remain stable and consistent. Scripture is the reliable constant that should assess our historical views and correct them when necessary.

A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, refers to the word "charge" in this lesson as a banking metaphor. We routinely use our bank accounts in money transactions. We deposit our money in a bank whose reputation and reliability we trust. Every month we receive a full accounting of every penny in our account. How much went into the account and how much was taken out of it, along with where it went, are reported to us. If the bank statement doesn't balance, we quickly get in touch with the bank to see what happened. Sadly, many Christians who view themselves as altogether conscientious do not have such a clear view of their faith or of their role in their Christian service. Many otherwise sincere leaders actually think that they can pretty much worship and minister according to their own private ideas, conscience instead of faith. For them Scripture is too remote, too unclear, and too non-specific, to be of any real help in the way that they serve. According to Paul, our ministry belongs to God, not to us, and we must account to Him for every aspect of its activities. If every pastor and every deacon were so faithful and devoted to Scripture—Scripture alone—for the manner in which they serve in their office, we would see a vastly different church in the world than we see today. When men followed God so clearly, Christianity's enemies reported of them that they "turned the world upside down" (Ac 17:6). Our stubborn doing Christianity our own way has caused our enemies in our culture to marginalize us as altogether irrelevant to the society. If we wish to alter that impression, perhaps we should return to the Biblical model of faith. View our charge as a banking trust.

Keeping with this idea of charge or trust, Paul introduces two additional metaphors in these verses. The first metaphor is that of a soldier engaged in war. A soldier goes to war under the directions of a commander. He does not make up the rules of engagement. He does not decide on the strategy of the battle. He takes directions from his superior.

So in the field of ministry and church leadership we are instructed to follow the directions of the Lord Jesus Christ as documented in Scripture, not think and act according to our own preferences or personalities.

The only good warfare is one fought according to the directions of the commander.

Paul's second metaphor relates to a ship steering a predetermined course across a body of water. For a church leader-teacher to turn from the clear teaching of Scripture is the equivalent of a ship's captain ignoring the course that he has charted and all knowledge that he has of the waters in which he sails, going in his own direction without regard for the available knowledge that he could gain of the waters and of his charted course. Here, no less than in the metaphor of warfare, submission to a higher authority and purpose forms a required part of the analogy. The captain of the ship is not on a pleasure cruise, directed by nothing more than his personal desires. He is on a mission that was decided by another. He has been charged with a valuable cargo that belongs to others. His charge is to deliver the cargo safely to the designated port. Do you suppose that Paul intended to emphasize to Timothy that God has given us quite specific directions as to the objectives and strategies of our ministry? I rest my case. The content of our preaching, along with the methods and objectives of church leadership come to us clearly in Scripture, so we are not to teach or lead according to our personal private objectives.

In the case of these two men Paul charges that they ignored their charge and made shipwreck of their faith. In 2Ti 2:17-19 Paul mentions Hymanaeus and another man who fell into grave error by alleging that the resurrection had past already. Not only did their shipwreck destroy their faith, Paul grieves that they also overthrew the faith of other believers as well. For someone to imitate this error today is as equally grave as it was when Paul confronted it in the first century. Scripture clearly teaches a final resurrection and general judgment of all mankind at the end. To twist Scripture into teaching that this epochal event has already occurred and that we are living after it, so it has no comfort or relevance for us could hardly be more unacceptable to sound Biblical doctrine.

What does Paul intend by his comment "...whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme"? I offer two sides to this point. First of all Paul had confronted and rejected these two men. Most commentators believe that "delivered unto Satan" likely refers to excommunication or some form of severe church discipline. As an apostle, Paul may have exercised more authority in this situation than the present-day pastor should claim. We may well accept the point that an apostle could impose such direct authority in a church. We should not use this event to justify dictatorial pastors attempting to imitate them. The office of pastor and the office of apostle are clearly distinct positions. We still honor the apostles through Scripture as our authority, but we should never use their authority to distort the offices of preacher-pastor or deacon into a despotic or unquestioned authority.

My second point from this verse is surprisingly positive. Unlike the false teachers whom we examined in 2 Peter, Paul views these men as recoverable. Whatever Paul intended by "turning" them over to Satan, he intended a positive outcome, "*that they may learn not to blaspheme.*" These men had the ability to learn of their error and to recover their faith from its devastating shipwreck.

Can you imagine that Hymanaeus was present when Paul spoke his parting words to the elders at Ephesus in Ac 20? He was a good man and sound in his faith and teaching. What happened to get him so far off his course? The error is unacceptable. The impact on others and on the valuable "charge" committed to him has been misappropriated. If your local bank sent you a monthly statement that showed several hundred dollars short of your records, how would you react? You would first contact

the bank to learn why the error occurred. How would you react if the banker acknowledged the error and then explained it by saying that he had some personal needs for money, so he appropriated your funds for his use? You would immediately remove all your funds from this untrustworthy bank. Then you would report him to the authorities for fraud. Why should we view our charge as leaders of the church with any less responsibility than we expect from our local banker? May we follow Paul and his charge to Timothy in unquestionable faithfulness.

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