

AVOIDING CONGREGATIONAL GANGRENE

by Ray C. Stedman

In our study of the Apostle Paul's second letter to Timothy, today we come to a major division of the epistle. Paul has been addressing the question of how to stand firm as a Christian, how to maintain the truth in a world that is falling apart. That is a very relevant issue to our own times, and we have seen much of great help to us in this letter. But now, at the fourteenth verse of the second chapter, a new subject is introduced, because Paul is addressing a new tactic of the enemy. The devil is very clever in his attack upon Christians and Christianity.

Years ago, the delightful English preacher, Joe Blinco, who was then a member of the Billy Graham team, used to say, "The devil is no mere pimple squeezer; he goes for the jugular vein."

That is true. Living in a world that is under the control of the one whom Jesus himself called "the god of this world" {2 Cor 4:4, cf, Luke 4:5-8} is not a game.

The devil has many tactics. He may seek to destroy the truth by patronizing Christianity and Christians. He may try to do so by popularity -- by diverting the attention of Christians away from why they are sent into the world. He has destroyed many a Christian witness that way. He may, as we have been seeing in this letter, bring about sharp persecution; he may try to paralyze us by fear, and by societal rejection; or he may bring about a polarization, an attempt to divide the body.

That is what we find introduced in this section, where the apostle is dealing with the two-front war that these Ephesian Christians are facing -- persecution from outside, and polarization from within the body. Second Timothy 2:14:

Remind them of this, and charge them before the Lord to avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. {2 Tim 2:14-17a RSV}

Those are very sharp and effective metaphors which the apostle employs to describe what was going on in the church at Ephesus. They were disputing about words; there were church squabbles breaking out, and they were dividing into factions over what the apostle literally calls, *word battles*. That is the meaning of the term translated here, "disputing about words." Many churches fall into that trap today. The words in question, of course, represented doctrinal viewpoints. The church has often struggled with trying to define doctrine in words. The words themselves are all right, but what is wrong is the battles that are waged over the words.

One of the outstanding examples in church history in this regard occurred during the days of the Reformation. Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther became engaged in a controversy with the Swiss Christians over the meaning of the Lord's words, "This is my body," when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. Those words became the subject of a great controversy that split the force of the Reformation. Under Martin Luther's teaching, the Lutherans maintained that those words were to be taken literally (that the bread really becomes, or is, the body of Christ), while the Swiss Christians maintained that the words were a figurative expression (that the words meant, "this represents my body"). Both sides argued at great length, and the Reformation was almost brought to a halt by the controversy.

In an attempt to heal the dispute, Count von Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss group, brought a delegation to Germany to meet with Martin Luther. When Luther entered the room where the meeting was to take place, he strode over to the large table, and, taking a piece of chalk, he wrote across the length of the table the Latin words, *Hoc est corpus meum* ("This is my body"). That was his stand. Whenever the other side tried to enter into discussion, Luther would refuse and again quote the words, *Hoc est corpus meum*. The controversy was

not settled, and the Reformation was severely limited as a result.

Christians can engage in word battles that are destructive in the extreme. Earlier in church history, a noteworthy quarrel raged over two words which sounded almost alike. (Actually, there was a difference of just one letter between them.) After the Council of Nicea, in the 5th century, Christians were debating the nature of Jesus, whether he was of the same substance as the Father, i.e., God himself, or whether he was of a like substance as the Father. The words in Greek are, *homoiousious* (which means "like substance"), or, *homoosious* (which means, "of the same substance"). That battle divided the whole camp of Christendom, and the effects of it are still visible in the ecclesiastical world today.

As a boy, I remember being involved in a congregational debate over whether immersion or sprinkling was the proper mode of baptism.

Sometimes churches split over eschatology -- is the rapture of the church going to be post-tribulation or pre-tribulation? Entire churches have split over such word battles.

Today, the word that threatens to divide many Christians is, "inerrancy." That is a good word. It means that the Scriptures were given to us from the mouth of God through the voices and pens of men in an inerrant fashion, i.e., without error, scientifically, historically, or theologically. That is a good doctrine -- I believe it myself -- but what often happens is that people choose up sides. They get so involved in defending, fighting, and arguing about that word they forget that the best way to defend the power of the Scripture is to proclaim it; turn the Scripture loose, let it defend itself. That is what Paul tells Timothy to do -- teach and share with others the truth that he has learned.

Timothy is told to do four things about the *word battle* in Ephesus. These guidelines will be helpful to us too, if we are engaged in a controversy of this sort:

The first thing the apostle says is,

Remind them of this, and charge them before the Lord to avoid disputing about words.
{2 Tim 2:14a RSV}

Timothy was to solemnly plead with them, earnestly reminding them that as brothers and sisters in the Lord they are not to engage in such battles.

As the Battle of Trafalgar was about to begin, Admiral Nelson came across two officers of his own flagship who were arguing hotly and about to take sword to each other. Nelson stepped between them and said, "Stop." Then, pointing to the French fleet, he said, "There is the enemy."

Christians need to remember that. We are not to be engaged in debates that get so intense and so hot that we forget what the Lord has sent us to do. Quarreling over words does no good, so Timothy was to plead earnestly with them to avoid such disputes.

I have been present at several church quarrels, and it is very evident that it is true that no further light is ever shed when a controversy gets heated. Nobody is bringing out truth; they are simply hammering away at each other with the Bible. Division, not unity, comes out of that. No witness before the world is increased because of church squabbles, but quite the opposite.

Further, Paul says, "it leads to catastrophe." The word *ruins* here ("only ruins the hearers"), is literally the word, "catastrophe." Church quarrels can lead to catastrophic events.

Some years ago I read about a church that got into a major quarrel over whether to have a Christmas tree in the church building. One faction contended that Christmas trees were of pagan origin, so to have one in the church would be to yield to a pagan practice. The other group thought that having one was merely a pleasant custom which they had grown up with since childhood, and there was nothing wrong with the practice. That side got a tree, decorated it and set it up in the church basement. When the other faction arrived, they grabbed the tree,

lights and all, and dragged it out into the parking lot. The other faction then took the tree and dragged it back into the church. A big fight resulted, right outside the church doors, and somebody had to call the police! The police came, and locked the doors, and all this was spread in the paper the next day.

That is the kind of foolish, silly catastrophe that can result when Christians engage in word battles that carry them much farther than they ever intended to go. Paul says to Timothy, "Remind them of that, and urge them solemnly to conduct themselves as Christians. Plead with them to stop disputings over words."

The second suggestion the apostle makes as to how to handle the incipient quarrel at Ephesus is, demonstrate a proper handling of the Scriptures. Paul says to Timothy, "Show them yourself how to do this." Here is one of those wonderful verses which we all ought to memorize. Verse 15:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. {2 Tim 2:15 RSV}

The first thing Paul suggests is, "seek the approval of God, not men." Many a church quarrel is carried on because people are so conscious of what some group within the congregation thinks of them. Many church leaders succumb to that: They join one side or the other because of the pressure of some group upon them. Here the apostle urges Timothy to lift himself above that, to think only of God's approval: "What does God think of what you are saying and what stance you take?" Timothy can tell that by the Word of God and by the presence of the Spirit of God. Does Timothy's attitude reflect a loving, compassionate, understanding heart? That is what is characteristic of the Spirit of God.

Then, Timothy is to work hard at understanding the usage of the words of Scripture; that is what Paul means here. Timothy is to be a workman, a laborer, somebody who needs not be ashamed because he has done his homework adequately; he has investigated throughout the whole of the Scriptures what the words in question mean.

I have found that it takes a minimum of ten to twelve hours to prepare a message for a Sunday morning service. One has to look at how the words in the passage under study are used elsewhere in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Because one is working with languages other than English, one has to go back to the original Greek or Hebrew text and see what the words mean in their original verbiage. Then one has to set the passage in the customs of the first, or earlier, centuries. That takes a lot of work. One of the reasons much of doctrine is misunderstood today is because church leaders, such as Timothy, have not done their homework. Paul urges Timothy to be "a workman who has no need to be ashamed," because he has put in the requisite work at discovering what the words of Scripture really mean.

Last, Timothy is to "rightly handle the word of truth." That has been widely misunderstood in our day. I grew up on the Scofield Reference Bible, which uses the King James text, to "rightly divide the word of truth." I was told that meant that as one read through the New Testament or the Old Testament, one was to divide it up according to which part was addressed to the Jews, which part to the Gentiles, and which part to the Christians; or, one was to divide it according to that which dealt with the church versus that which dealt with the kingdom; whether it addressed itself to those who are under the Law or those who are under grace. That gave rise to what is frequently called, Dispensationalism, where one had to be very careful to understand exactly who God was speaking to when he said something.

There is some value and some truth in that view, but I have had to learn that this text is not talking about dividing the word of truth. The word is more properly translated, "rightly handling the word of truth."

Actually, the word used here is a very interesting one. It is a single word which means "to cut straight" -- "cut straight the word of truth," Paul says. Commentators have struggled as to what Paul is referring to in that metaphor.

Some have thought he meant a plowman, who sets his eye on an object, a tree or a stake, at the end of a field, and he plows a straight course right to that object. According to that view, Paul was suggesting that as Timothy reads the Scriptures he is to get hold of the final truth and not deviate from that; he is to plow a

straight course through the word of truth.

Other commentators have thought Paul was referring to the way a stonemason builds a wall: he drops a plumb line, then he is careful to cut the stone so it is straight according to the plumb line.

I think, however, that Paul is probably referring to his own experience as a tentmaker. Timothy traveled with Paul, so he must have worked many nights with him, cutting and sewing material together to make tents. That is what Paul is referring to; a figure that Timothy would well understand.

You ladies who have made garments from patterns know how important it is to cut the material straight. If you cut it on a line away from what the pattern says you will end up with a piece that is either too small or too large. When you try to fit it with other pieces it will either droop and sag because it is too large, or it will pull and pinch because it is too small.

That is what Paul is talking about. When you handle the Scriptures, he says to Timothy, be sure to cut a straight line. That is, understand the words that are used as they relate to other Scriptures that deal with the subject, so that when the whole thing is put together you will not have to pull or stretch or try to fit something in that does not quite belong; you have clearly understood what each section means, and it will all fit together naturally.

Paul is dealing here with a very important principle in understanding the truth of Scripture -- all Scripture must be understood in the light of the rest of Scripture. We really have not ever understood any single passage until we have carefully tried to fit it with all that the Scriptures say about it. One of the most frequent ways in which error begins is when one group takes a single passage, or a single book, of Scripture and zeros in on a single text, or a few chosen texts, and builds its entire doctrine on that one passage.

Some groups take a passage like, "And they all spake with tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance," {cf, Acts 2:4 KJV}. Building on that, they insist that every Christian must speak with tongues in order to be filled with the Spirit. But that is ignoring all the rest that Scripture says about tongues. It is very important that the whole passage be understood and that it fits without difficulty the rest of Scripture.

The third thing the apostle says to Timothy about handling church squabbles is in Verse 16:

Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. {2 Tim 2:16-17a RSV}

The word for *avoid* is really the word, "walk around." Skirt it; do not get involved; do not join the clamor; do not let yourself be down into these kinds of word battles because, if you get involved, it will only escalate the problem. "It will lead to more and more ungodliness," Paul says. The term he uses, which is translated here, *godless chatter*, is literally "empty babblings." That refers to people who shoot off their mouths, who talk off the top of their heads and display a lot of emotionalism. Paul tells Timothy to not get involved with that because it will escalate; it will lead to more and more "unwholesomeness," literally.

Many years ago, a man who briefly attended this congregation became unhappy with us, and went off to join a group which, he said, was more faithful to the Scriptures. That group felt that they were getting special visions and revelations from God. They indulged in prophesyings about individuals within the group, and supposedly received special insights into what other people in the group could do or ought to do. This man was caught up in that whole thing, though we tried to point out the dangers if he persisted in that. The group became more and more involved in specialized healings. They got into matters of tongues and revelations and prophesyings, and then they moved away from this area. Later, I heard that they had gone on into dealing with the occult. Finally, they ended up actually taking a living goat, setting it in their midst, and worshipping it. That is the kind of ungodliness, unwholesomeness, that type of thing can lead to as it escalates and goes on more and more into misunderstanding and confusion.

Further, says the apostle, it will "eat like gangrene." Gangrene is an infection of the bloodstream that not only spreads rapidly through the body, but smells horribly. Foul, suppurating wounds keep increasing in size, so

that it is one of the most difficult problems to handle, medically. God's view of a church squabble is that it spreads like gangrene. It smells bad, it spreads quickly, and a whole congregation can be infected by it.

Paul has an example right at hand in Ephesus. Here is a case in point (Verse 17b):

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some. {2 Tim 2:17b-18 RSV}

We met this man Hymenaeus in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul says he had, "delivered him unto Satan in order that he may learn not to blaspheme," (1 Tim 1:20 {RSV}). That was several years earlier. But, evidently, it had not done Hymenaeus any good, because he is still spreading his false doctrine throughout the church, teaching that the resurrection was already past.

It is possible to trace how he got into that kind of teaching. Undoubtedly, he took some of Paul's teaching about what happens to a non -- believer when he becomes a Christian, that he is baptized into the death and resurrection of our Lord. In some way we have been made to partake of the death and resurrection of Christ so that we die with him and we are risen again with him in the spirit. Evidently, Hymenaeus taught that is all there is going to be; that spiritual resurrection that you experienced when you were born again is all the resurrection there is going to be. That probably was an accommodation to the Greek philosophy which was prevalent in Ephesus at that time, which said that the body was evil, so it was unthinkable that God would ever be concerned with resurrecting bodies; they were tombs from which we ought to be glad we have escaped.

In teaching that, Hymenaeus was accommodating to the doctrine of the world by taking only partial truth from the revelation of the Scriptures. That is how heresy starts. Hymenaeus ignored the Lord's own words when he predicted that the hour was coming when "all who are in the grave shall hear the voice of the Son of God and shall come forth, some to a resurrection of condemnation and some to a resurrection of redemption," {cf, John 5:28b-29}. The resurrection is not only spiritual, it is also literal. Those teachers in Ephesus were ignoring that, as a result, "they upset the faith of many."

In First Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul himself tells us that if we lose the resurrection we have lost everything. The whole of Christian truth rests on whether Jesus was actually bodily raised from the dead -- and as a consequence we too will be raised from the dead -- or not. If we lose that, Paul says, our faith is vain and our preaching is vain {cf, 1 Cor 15:17}; we have no hope beyond the grave. Here was a serious deviation from the revelation of the Scripture. It illustrates how error can take form and rapidly spread throughout a congregation.

The last thing the apostle says is, remember God's firm foundation. Verse 19:

But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and "Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." {2 Tim 2:19 RSV}

In other words, "Timothy, don't panic over this. Yes, there may be heresy in the congregation, there may be dissension among you and you may have to do battle against it, but, remember, 'God's firm foundation stands.'"

That is like a coin with two sides, God's side and man's side.

1. On God's side is, "The Lord knows them that are his." It is remarkable to recognize in the Gospels that Jesus knew that Judas was a traitor from the beginning. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus knew before he chose him that Judas was a devil. He knew those who were his, and those who were not his. Paul reminds us that God's church is never going to be altered, shaken, or diminished, even by the heresies that may rage among us. God knows them that are his.
2. The other side of the coin is that man can know those who are God's when he sees them departing

from this kind of iniquity: false doctrine and false teaching among us. We can be confident that those who really are Christians will ultimately see the error that is involved, and leave it. That is where our faith can rest.

Both of those quotations in Verse 19 are taken from the story in the sixteenth chapter of the book of Numbers about the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. During Israel's wandering through the wilderness, those three men challenged the authority of Moses, saying, "Why do you listen to Moses? He is no different than we are. We are men of understanding like Moses." Why don't you listen to us, was their implication. Moses took the problem to the Lord, and the Lord said, "Bring them here. Let me give them an examination." Korah, Dathan and Abiram and their families all stood together. Suddenly, before the eyes of the whole congregation, the ground opened up, down they went into the pit and the ground slammed shut behind them. God said, "Any more questions?"

Yes, God knows them that are his. He has his own ways of dealing with this kind of thing. The apostle says that those who are genuine will depart from iniquity. That is the test of a true believer. There is a life in him that will not let him compromise himself with evil and iniquity forever. But there may be a long-term struggle. I have seen that happen, sometimes over a period of years, but God will not let them go on. They must leave the false teaching at last because they cannot live with themselves any longer. Speaking of certain apostates, the Apostle John said, "They went out from us that it might be evident that they were not of us, for if they had been of us they would have continued with us," {cf, 1 Jn 2:19}. That is the mark that will encourage Timothy.

To recapitulate, Paul tells Timothy that the way to handle disputes about words in the congregation is to plead with them for unity.

- First, he says, urge them before the Lord to remember who they are and to stop quarreling;
- Second, labor for accuracy in understanding the Scriptures;
- Third, avoid complicity with this; and,
- Finally, do not panic; God is still in control.

His firm foundation will stand, for God knows those who are his and they will manifest themselves sooner or later by departing from iniquity.

That wonderful word of advice is how God urges us to handle quarrels like that in this 20th century day as well.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to remember that we are to be workmen who need not to be ashamed, rightly handling, cutting a straight path, with the Word of truth; and that we can rest upon the assurance that you know those who are really yours. Thank you for judging among us in this regard. We praise you for the very small degree in which we have had to be concerned with this here at this church. We pray that, whenever anything like this occurs, we may handle it in the wise and wonderful way that Paul outlines. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: Avoiding Congregational Gangrene
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in Second Timothy
Scripture: 2 Tim 2:14-19
Message No: 5
Catalog No: 3786
Date: March 28, 1982

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