

The Pastoral Epistles and Sound Doctrine

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"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 Timothy 2:15. REVISED STANDARD VERSION.

THE group of letters known as the Pastorals, I Timothy, II Timothy and Titus, was written by Paul between the conclusion of the first Roman imprisonment and his death, sometime between 64 and 68 A. D. This group of epistles is often also called the ecclesiological group because they deal with various doctrines that treat of the Church.

While the topics and doctrines discussed in these letters should be of interest to all Christians, the Pastoral Letters ought to be of special concern to theological professors, synodical officials, missionaries, pastors, teachers, and writers of exegetical and expository materials. In them Paul by divine inspiration gives directions for the organization, training and government of Christian congregations, taking note also of the treatment which is to be accorded various groups found in a Christian congregation: the old and young, widows and virgins, backsliders and heretics. Laymen should likewise be well versed in the thirteen chapters of the three Pastoral Letters because they provide a divine rule by which to measure and evaluate the work of a pastor, a teacher, a missionary or a professor.

Certain concepts recur in all three ecclesiological epistles. Two major ideas found in all three are: warning against false doctrine and the exhortation to abide in the truth and lead a holy life. In all three epistles the organization, the doctrine and the life of the Christian Church are also stressed.

One of the distinctive features of the Pastoral Letters is the emphasis on soundness of doctrine. The Westminster Edition of the Bible quotes as its summarizing caption: "Take heed unto thyself and the doctrine." Professor Erdman has written: "Exhorta-

tion to sound doctrine constitutes the main burden of all Pastoral Letters as a whole." Professor Knox of Union Theological Seminary, New York City, asserts that the major interest in the Pastoral Epistles is to be found in the stress on soundness of doctrine.

There are at least thirteen references in I and II Timothy and Titus that allude to sound doctrine and manifest a concern for warding off false doctrine. Thus Paul says to Timothy: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this shalt thou both save thyself and them that hear thee." (I Timothy 4:16). To Titus, Paul writes: "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine, both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." (1:9). Again the Apostle says to the same pastor and evangelist, that he is to rebuke the Cretans sharply "that they may be sound in faith." (Titus 1:13). To Timothy, Paul enjoins: "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust," avoiding profane and vain babblings, and opposition of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith." (I Tim. 6:20-21).

Timothy is encouraged, yes even commanded, to be a workman who handles the truth of God correctly or aright. This is an area in which all interpreters of the Word must be vitally concerned, whether laymen or professional, whether they serve in the pulpit, the Bible class, the confirmation class, the Sunday School class, in personal counselling, in evangelistic efforts through the medium of the printed page. The proper handling of the Message of Life is important because of its eternal implications and consequences.

II Timothy 2:15 is rendered variously in the versions. In the King James the text under discussion is translated: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." In our Synodical literature this translation has been used to support the position that there are two basic doctrines in the Bible, namely, Law and Gospel.

Williams in his *The New Testament* renders II Timothy 2:15 in this way: "Do your best to present yourself to God an approved workman who has nothing to be ashamed of, who properly presents the message of truth." *The Twentieth Century New Testament* gives this translation: "Do your utmost to shew yourself true to God, a workman with no reason to be ashamed, accurately in de-

livering the Message of the Truth." The eminent New Testament Greek scholar Goodspeed renders it: "Do your best to win God's approval as a workman who has nothing to be ashamed of but rightly shapes the message of truth." Moffatt's well known Bible translation reads: "Do your utmost to let God see that you are a sound workman with no need to be ashamed of the way you handle the Word of Truth." The verb *orthotomeo* of the original Greek is the word which has been interpreted variously by producers of both the standard and modern versions. Hendriksen in his commentary on the Pastoral Epistle says that the word *orthotomeo* should be translated "rightly handling."

Even if we accept the translation of the *Revised Standard Version* of II Timothy 2:15, it certainly would include the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. When these two forms of God's Word are not presented correctly or when they are commingled, the Word of God is not handled rightly or properly. Great basic errors in theological systems of our day undoubtedly are directly connected with the failure to grasp the purpose, function and effect of the Law and Gospel respectively. One of the great blessings of the Protestant Reformation was the discovering by Luther that Law and Gospel must be properly distinguished if souls are to be saved, comforted and kept on the narrow path by the grace of God. This year the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is commemorating the sesquicentennial of the birth of C. F. W. Walther, the great leader of the early history of the Missouri Synod. If our church had only Walther's *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, this would constitute a legacy for which we should honor his memory. This work, which rests so heavily on Luther's insights of Law and Gospel, ought not only to be in the possession of all teachers and pastors, but also to be periodically read and studied by them.

However, II Timothy 2:15 goes further when it asserts that the Word of God is to be correctly handled at all times. One of the major concerns of Paul in II Timothy is with a group of false teachers, identified by many scholars as Gnostics. The latter claimed to have knowledge superior to Christianity and held that the teachings of Christianity were inferior. At the end of I Timothy, Paul writes to him: "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is

falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith." (6:20; R.S.V.)

Gnosticism was an eclectic system of religious and philosophical truths taken from Judaism, Christianity, dualistic Zoroastrianism, Greek philosophy, and other sources. In some respects Gnosticism incorporated ideas which were in harmony with the best philosophy of that day. The Gnostics priding themselves on having superior knowledge used this as bait to induce Christians to abandon their faith in favor of this syncretistic religious philosophy.

Pastor Timothy in Ephesus and Pastor Titus on the island of Crete had to battle the aggressive attacks of these Gnostics who used Scripture in an incorrect way. One school of Gnosticism denied the true humanity of Jesus, while another group attacked the deity of Christ by making Him one of the emanations from the Light, God. They likewise denied both the resurrection of Christ and man's corporeal resurrection. The Gnostics also insisted that matter in itself was sinful. The paragraph in which verse 15 occurs clearly shows that Paul was warning Timothy against the teachings of these false teachers, who were improperly handling the word of truth.

Philosophy has always influenced the interpretation of the Bible, as attested by the history of interpretation of the Bible. From the time of the early Church Fathers till modern times, we find that Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Kantianism, Hegelianism and Existentialism, to mention some of the outstanding forms of philosophical thinking, have influenced the hermeneutics of the Church at various times and led to an incorrect handling of the word of truth. The truth of God's revelation was either watered down or changed radically by these various forms of philosophy.

The conflict in the Church today revolves around the question: how is the Bible to be interpreted? Neo-orthodoxy tells us that we cannot accept the early chapters of Genesis since they disagree with the philosophy and science of our times. Many expositors of our day maintain that we cannot accept the Old Testament prophecies because they demand a belief in the miraculous. Those who accept the Scriptures in their literal sense are called "literalist"; those who insist on abiding by the literal meaning of Scripture are accused of bibliolatry. The doctrines of Christ's resur-

rection and ascension are denied by Bultmann and those who insist that the Scriptures must be demythologized.

The Pastoral Epistles call upon all proclaimers of the Word to set forth the faith, an objective body of doctrines, correctly, and not to misrepresent its teachings. The man who handles the truth properly does not change, pervert, mutilate, or distort it; neither does he employ it with a wrong purpose in mind. The faithful interpreter will courageously, yet lovingly, apply the Scriptures to concrete conditions and circumstances for the glory of God, the conversion of sinners, and for the edification of the saints.