

BaptistWay Bible Series for June 4: New Testament churches faced challenges

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New Testament churches faced challenges

- 1 Timothy 1:1-19

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In many ways and in differing contexts, we tend to have “good old days” syndrome. We long for the way things used to be, as if to say current circumstances are undesirable. One common practice is to compare the church of today with that described in the book of Acts (see chapters 2, 4 and 5). Seldom do today’s churches exhibit the harmony among believers and their devotion to the apostles’ teaching described in that book. This leaves us longing for “the good old days.”

A closer reading of the New Testament, however, reveals the good old days really weren’t always that good. Much of it was written to address some kind of problem facing the churches. There were internal conflicts and external threats; there were matters of doctrine and of behavior. One could

almost make the case that if the church had no problems, there would have been no occasion to write the documents we have.

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1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are known as the Pastoral Epistles. And while they are instructive in many ways, Paul did not write these as “Introduction to Ministry” manuals for Timothy (in Ephesus) and Titus (on Crete). For in addition to instructions on the appointment of various types of leaders and what should be taught to different age groups, he also wrote to equip these men to respond to threats from false teachers who would influence the churches toward wrong beliefs and immoral behavior (and often the two were interrelated).

Timothy’s task: Remove the false teachers

After the opening salutations to Timothy, Paul gets right to the point. He reminds Timothy why he left him in Ephesus, to “command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer” (v. 3). The prohibition is against teaching something different (see vv. 10-11). Likewise, Timothy was to put an end to their focus on “myths and endless genealogies” (v. 4).

Interpreters still debate whether Paul referred to a form of Gnosticism (understanding “genealogies” as eons) or a form of Judaism (mythical interpretations of Old Testament genealogies). Paul makes clear at the end of verse 4 the results of such: these “promote controversies rather than

God's work—which is by faith." It appears Paul is concerned with teachings which (and teachers who) clearly oppose the central tenets of the faith as well as quibble over secondary matters. Paul instructs Timothy to put a stop to these people.

Paul then clarifies for Timothy the goal of his command. He wants Timothy to draw people back to love. Apparently, these people were not concerned about love but about their pet beliefs. Paul identifies the source of love—a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith (v. 5).

But those in question "wandered away from these" (v. 6). Instead, they have majored on minors. Paul calls it "meaningless talk." Ironically, these people also wanted to teach the law. But Paul declares their ignorance leaves them woefully inadequate for such a task. He says, "they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm" (v. 7).

Paul also hints at the potential for them to misuse the law. So in verses 8-11, Paul describes the function of the law; it is mainly to pronounce judgment on those who would break it. But in addition to acts of sin, the law also judges "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine" (v. 10). Sound doctrine—that is, healthy, whole, correct—is defined by the gospel Paul was entrusted to preach (v. 11). Reminiscent of Galatians 1:8-9, Paul sets the standard for what is correct teaching; it is the gospel he originally preached.

God's amazing grace toward Paul

His comment about being entrusted the gospel calls Paul to reflect on what a great privilege it is and how unlikely a candidate he originally was for the task. He humbly acknowledges the work of God's grace and mercy in his life. He was a "blasphemer" a "persecutor" and a "violent man" (v. 13). Reflecting on his call then reminded Paul that truly "Christ came into the

world to save sinners” (v. 15).

When Paul thought of sinners, he declared himself the prototype: “of whom I am the worst.” He again acknowledged he was where he was because of the mercy shown him and nothing else. Thus, in contrast to these would-be teachers who were arrogant despite their ignorance, Paul expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to serve the Lord. Such reflection caused Paul to burst out in praise to God (v. 17).

Timothy’s task: Fight the good fight

Paul once again turns to his command to Timothy (v. 5). Paul’s instructions to Timothy are in keeping with the words of Timothy’s original call and commission, and if Timothy would put them into practice he would “fight the good fight” (v. 18). It is difficult to know whether “keeping faith and a good conscience” (v. 19) constitute the means by which he would fight or its outcome. However, Paul’s command to press on is accompanied by an example of failure.

Hymenaeus and Alexander “rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith” (vv. 19-20).

Once Timothy purged the church of unhealthy doctrine and behavior, he could take Paul’s prescription for maintaining a healthy church.

Do not be disheartened to learn the early church was not perfect; instead take heart that we have instructions from the New Testament on how to respond to wrong beliefs and immoral behavior.

Discussion questions

- How could false teachings enter the church so soon, even during the lifetime of the apostles?
- Did the church in Ephesus remain true to Timothy's leadership (see Revelation 2:1-7)?
- What unhealthy doctrines and moral failures threaten our churches today?



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