

(4) ... by refuting error

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 August 2008

Preacher: Nick Winther

- [0 : 0 0] We shall be reading from the second letter to Timothy, chapter 2, which you can find on page 1198. Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.
- 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.
- But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hermeneus and Thaletus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened.
- They are upsetting the faith of some. 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.
- Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honourable use, some for dishonourable.
- [1 : 2 3] Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonourable, he will be a vessel for honourable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.
- So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.
- Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies. You know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.
- God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will.
- Thank you, Chris. Well, it would be helpful to me, at least, if you'd keep your Bibles open on page 1198, the passage we've just had read to us.
- [2 : 4 1] Also, on the back of the service sheets you were given on your way in, there is a space which is ideal for taking notes or writing surreptitious messages to the person you're sitting next to, if you're desperate.
- Great. You'd probably need to be a monk living in a cave not to realise that there are some difficulties in the Anglican Communion at the moment.
- Over the last few months, we have had splashed over the papers, TV, news every night, details of Gathcon, where 1,200 bishops, senior bishops in the Anglican Communion, leaders of churches, lay members of churches, have been meeting in Jerusalem.
- They represent something like half of the members of the Anglican Communion. And then those same bishops, refusing, in many cases, to come to Lambeth, that 10-yearly meeting of all the bishops in the Anglican Communion.

And then you've had bishops like Gene Robinson, coming from the United States, openly, in an open homosexual relationship, the church there deciding it's appropriate for him to be a bishop, coming over here, not being welcomed, but going around many churches, welcomed in many churches, by many bishops and leaders of the Anglican Communion today.

[4 : 05] And the question really comes, well, what are we to make of all of this? What do we really think? Do we think that both parties could be right?

Is that ever possible? I mean, the position seems so extreme. Surely that can't be right. There must be an issue here that needs resolution. But does it matter? Well, these are some of the issues we're going to be looking at today, some of the questions we're going to be trying to answer as we think through the letter of Paul to Timothy.

We're continuing in our series, and this is Paul's last recorded letter to Timothy. Paul is in chains. He's a prisoner. He's near execution, and he writes to keep Timothy, his protege, one of his protege's, going, encouraging him as a church leader to keep focused on the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

And in particular, encouraging him to keep going in the face of the hardship that comes hand in hand from centering his ministry on Jesus Christ and his gospel.

As Paul says in the first chapter, verse 8, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me, his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel.

[5 : 22] Well, last week, we saw that Timothy needed to train up faithful men as the next generation of leaders to take the baton on in the relay race, if you like. And also that such teachers and he must keep going even in the face of the sort of suffering and persecution that Paul faced all of his ministry life.

Chapter 2, verses 2 and 3, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also, share in suffering, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Well, in the second half of the chapter, Paul is continuing to explain how these faithful men need to prepare for ministry in particular and what they should be teaching and how they should be teaching it.

If you like, the message and the manner of the true teacher of God's church. So let's move to our first point, verses 14 to 19, the approved worker rightly handles the word of truth.

See, Paul's great concern for Timothy as a teacher is set out in verse 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.

[6 : 41] And right at the start of this, we see that the person whom the church leaders should be most worried about pleasing is God. Vickers, ministers, bishops, and all teachers in the church today are no different from you and me in facing a strong temptation to look for the adulation of the crowds or their superiors, respect for being impressive, the plaudits of having a successful or growing church, or being regarded as a pillar of the community.

And whilst a church leader needs to understand how he is perceived and considered before any plaudits of the people are counted, he needs to look first to God.

And what will stop him feeling ashamed before God when called to account for his ministry? Well, the answer to that question centres on what the teacher is saying. Again, look at verse 15.

Do your best present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. Well, if Timothy is not to be ashamed before God, he must aim to be a worker who rightly handles the word of truth, literally cuts straight the word of truth.

The word in Greek seems best to be understood as bringing to mind images of roads, and especially Roman roads, with their amazing straightness as they went from city to city with what often seems like unerring accuracy.

[8 : 07] And so with a church leader, the worker must go straight for the word of truth and with that same sense of unerring accuracy. Like the Roman architects and engineers of yesteryear, neither deviating to the left nor the right.

And what does this look like? Well, the true Christian leader should teach in a way that clearly shows the plain truth of God's true gospel, not obscuring it through clever words and complex ideas.

The teacher should seek to be faithful to God's revealed truth in Scripture, not distorting it by pontificating about their own hobby horses, and of course that means not leaving out the bits we don't like.

And if the good church leader must strain every muscle to teach the whole church the word of good, they must have nothing to do with things which are not leading towards God's truth.

And this is what Paul terms word strife in verse 14, translated as quarrelling, or irreverent babble in verse 16, look at verse 16 with me, but avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.

[9 : 17] Well, if the standard to strive for is getting the truth right in teaching and preaching, then this type of teaching is, as Paul puts it, swerving from the truth, literally missing the mark that is the truth.

Just as a road which isn't aiming in the right direction won't lead you to the city you're going to, so teaching, which isn't aiming to teach God's truth, will lead away from where God wants his people to be, and into what Paul calls ungodliness, the ruining of the hearers, and upsetting of the faith of some.

And of course, as awful as the corruption of an individual is, the real risk is that the teaching will spread within a church, or churches, or even a denomination, as that great apostle himself said, it's like gangrene, a horrible condition, with a lack of blood flow to your flesh caused it to start to die, and there's a creeping spreading of the death to the surrounding flesh.

I'm sure we've all heard the stories of that horrible effect of gangrene on climbers or explorers or soldiers, with stories of that stink of decaying flesh. Well, Paul's point, this is exactly what is going on in the spiritual life of each and every church where teaching that is avoiding God's truth is prevalent.

Failing to properly teach God's truth leads to a spreading decay in the healthy flesh of the church, an awful picture of spiritual death threading throughout God's people.

[10 : 52] Well, unfortunately, false teaching doesn't look like that on the surface. usually it spreads precisely because the teaching looks so attractive, so new and exciting, and often the teachers look so credible.

They have, as we'll see in chapter 3, verse 5, the appearance of godliness. What the Bible calls false teachers would really look as such on the surface. There are no horns or tails in view.

They may well be delightful individuals who have a large church, a good following. They may well be highly educated and have wonderful oratory skills, and they will no doubt teach with great sincerity, not necessarily realizing the tragedy they are causing.

The problem is that you can be sincere about something, but you can also be sincerely wrong. The issue is that if the church leaders of today are not teaching the truth, then they are dangerous to the ordinary members of the church.

Well, how do we apply this to ourselves? Well, let's just think about a minute about the last conversation you had with your church leader about their sermons.

[12 : 02] I mean, have you ever had a conversation with your church leader about their sermons? Or is it a kind of nice sermon vicar straight out the door for a nice Sunday roast or fish and chips, whatever your preference is? Well, we need to challenge our preachers and our teachers, our church leaders on what they're saying.

We need to keep them preaching the truth to us because we need to be nourished by the truth. The alternative is terrible. Most of us, during our lifetimes, will move churches a number of times.

Jobs will move or will join new church plants or for whatever reason. Well, many of us will one day find ourselves in a church where the teaching has turned from faithful to full of errors and the church leader concerned is steadfastly refusing to turn from the false doctrines that they are now introducing.

We have some friends facing an increasing prosperity gospel being introduced in a church not far from London where a new curate has been appointed and the vicar is not strong enough or willing to take a lead in saying no.

So how should they and we react in this situation? Well, if we take Paul's warning seriously, ultimately the point may come where we need to leave a greatly loved church with all the resultant pain and broken relationships that accompany such a decision.

[13 : 30] But if we realize the danger such a church faces, leaving maybe the only way of safety for us and our families, it's a decision not to be taken lightly, but aren't we beginning to see the danger?

I know of some in this church who have been forced into that painful position of making that decision in the past. May we remember this passage and have the courage if we're ever in that situation too.

Now I just want to be clear, I'm not saying that Grace Church is the answer to all such problems, that everyone should forthwith move here. Did we not see that these are problems that arise from within the church, ultimately from potentially within Grace Church even too.

But for girls' grace there go we. The point is not come to Grace Church as if we were the only valid church in town, the point is wherever you go to church, make sure the teaching is trying to take God's word, God's truth in the Bible and to faithfully explain it so that we can each grow in love for Jesus and Christ likeness in our lives.

Well let's move on to our second end and you'll be glad to hear a slightly briefer point. In verse 20 to 23 we see that the useful worker needs to pursue godliness.

[14 : 52] See Paul is moving on from the material of the preacher to talk about the manner of the preacher and his first point is that a model teacher should not be someone who is obviously saying do what I say not what I do.

In verse 21 Paul calls on Timothy and the Christian leaders he was to train up to be useful vessels or instruments set apart and useful to God ready for every good work.

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.

I love watching medical dramas on TV but you see a lot of surgeons with all the little bits I don't actually enjoy quite so much but just imagine a surgeon walking into his operating theatre scrubbed up and ready for action on whichever lucky or if it's a TV drummer unlucky patient was next in his queue or her queue and they look down and they see a tray full of dirty tools scalpels caked in the last patient's blood clamps covered in all sorts of circumstances substances designed to put you off your lunch well I suspect at that point they'd be unlikely to say oh well let's press on anyway just as surgeons don't generally use dirty scalpels God doesn't generally use people who are unrepentantly sinful Paul's basic point is that if a church leader wants to be useful to God he should realize that his life should itself reflect his teaching if ungodly teaching leads towards sinfulness how can it be appropriate for a minister or vicar or bishop to live in a way that stands in direct contrast to

God's teaching of course it can't however one important caveat or point if you like this passage is not saying that a Christian leader must be perfect the Bible is quite clear that we are all sinful people our ministers and church leaders included no we have a confession in our Sunday morning services for exactly this reason and it's as necessary for the church leader just as much as you or I to confess our sins to God now the issue here is the direction of the minister's life and whether there are persistent large and obvious lapses in view in essence the church leader needs to adopt an attitude where he is actively fleeing or trying to escape from what these things that offend God look at verse 22 so flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness faith love and peace it's all too easy for all of us to hide parts of our lives from each other where we continue in our sinful and evil ways but if you are a leader of a church and you do that and it is found out it can be catastrophic for the church let me try and give an example

[17 : 58] I suspect most of us haven't heard much of Ted Haggard before well Ted Haggard was a pastor to one of the US's mega churches which had over 12,000 members pretty big for a Sunday morning slightly larger than us I suspect well in November 2006 to the delight of the likes of the New York Times and other liberal papers in the US he resigned or was removed from every one of his leadership positions after he admitted patronizing prostitute Mike Jones for homosexual sex and taking metamphetamines Ted Haggard had previously written in his 2002 book I want a church I can stay in for years I don't want surprises scandals or secrets from my church leaders now think of the damage to the Christians in that church and indeed throughout the US think of the opportunities for those not in church to resist its message by simply branding it hypocritical you see the great danger to having a minister vicar or bishop who is living in unrepentant sin is that it totally devalues the message which they are teaching and opens the door to irreverent babble to fill the void left as they are muted well given this let me ask a simple question how do we pray for our church leaders do we pray for our church leaders do we regularly even think about the denomination that we're part of or the churches that we're part of or the leaders that we look to do we realize that they are as tempted as we are and the danger if they were to fall from grace we must pray for them to be protected from temptation and to carry on fighting the good fight and do you speak to them as a Christian brother realizing that they need encouraging to keep on a narrow path just as much as each of us do or do we just go to them for our own needs our own wants when we're in trouble well let's move on firstly the leaders must rightly rightly handle the word of truth and secondly leaders must flee youthful passions and pursue godliness or thirdly the effective worker teaches graciously verse 24 to 26 in our final section of today's passage

Paul continues with a great theme of encouraging church leaders faithful church leaders to persevere even in the face of hostility opposition and worse from within the church let's look at verse 24 and the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone able to teach patiently enduring evil correcting his opponents with gentleness did you see that patiently enduring evil well as the next two chapters will show there is much that needs to be endured even in the face of provocation of the severest kind a whispering campaign opposition on the church council people trying to be to actively make life difficult or worse for the church leader even in these cases the pastor or leader his response has to be to endure evil being perpetrated against him and keep going and it's in this context that Paul throws down the really big challenge in verse 24 the Lord's servant must be kind to everyone able to teach patiently enduring evil correcting his opponents with gentleness you see in the face of false teaching and personal attack and all sorts of horrible things that people have to deal with really damaging things to people's self-image the manner of the

Christian leader is called to live is one of kindness to everyone patience even in the face of evil and exhibiting gentleness see whilst the Christian leader is called to be gracious gentle it's worth noting what this is not this is not appeasement to false teaching and a seeking after unity that subordinates the truth did you see that little phrase correcting his opponents now a Christian leader needs to go on patiently enduring opposition and all sorts of hardship whilst continuing to teach the truth including correcting the false ideas floating around in Christian circles and in the church however whilst the church leader has to keep refuting error this sort of approach needs to be applied judiciously for there is also a type of issue that can arise which is to all intents of purposes a complete waste of time and energy well for this type of issue the

Christian leader is wise to keep as far away as possible verse 23 have nothing to do with foolish ignorant controversies you know that they breed quarrels the hard thing of course is to distinguish between a foolish ignorant controversy which should be avoided and irreverent babble or false teaching which is in need of active correction and stamping out see after some consideration I think my personal rule of thumb with this issue is that these are things which are not answerable biblically and are rather a matter of preference or wisdom or tradition however must remember that they're causing quarrels precisely because there are such strongly and passionately held views on each side again we need to be careful to note Paul is not saying he is not saying that these things don't matter to people people really care about this stuff or you wouldn't have this sort of a quarrel ultimately as we all know there are plenty of areas of church life where you will never come to an answer that will satisfy everyone rather prolonged debate just leads to grandstanding and embittered relationships as the protagonists are blind to the irrelevant nature of the debate when measured against the greater standard of the gospel I'm sure we can all think of pet peeves which have a tendency to cause such bitter quarrels and yet are more a matter of style or preference think about the type of music or in many church of

England churches in the country the choice of liturgy and the use of prayer book are classic examples and in some cases abstractions of otherwise important theological points can creep into these categories in each case you will never ever see everyone happy and at some point the minister is better simply avoiding the debate but then back to the main point the teacher is called to a kind gentle and patient manner whilst teaching even in the face of evil and erroneous opposition why is this important well the great hope is that the teacher's manner would allow the truth to be heard and therefore that the person might come to know God verse 25 and 26 God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will you see the shocking truth of course is that Paul is saying that many of these people who are in the church but promoting terrible falsehoods are actually in the snare of the devil they may seem lovely people and have all the trappings of high church office but they are not Christians if they are trapped and doing the will of the devil again we have that sense that they of course would not realize their own predicament the ultimate motivation for gentle insurance in the face of opposition is not bloody mindedness or being right but the hope that God would use our message unobscured by our manner to reach into the hearts of those who are opposing the truth and therefore showing themselves to be no Christians at all and to bring them to understand the gospel and to a position of true repentance amen indeed well ultimately we need to trust God to use the proclamation of the truth to save as it's delivered in a gentle and loving fashion

[26 : 55] I think one of the major lessons we need to learn is that as a church we need to avoid demonizing the individual we're not arguing against them so much as against the false idea or teaching or theology that they're representing take Todd Bentley as an example I don't know if you've heard of Todd Bentley he's been holding increasingly large meetings for over 10,000 people a night over the last few months in Lakeland Florida well it looks as though he might well end up as someone doing great harm to Christians it's not his choice of clothes his music preferences his mannerisms his strange language I don't know if you've read the article in evangelicals now he has a habit of overusing the word bam it's very strange his excessive tattoos or his piercings these are not the things which will do harm to the church it's what he's teaching by either word or example which is the key issue so often we assume that our opponents must understand the truth but are really consciously being obstinate or worse very few people consciously teach something that they know to be heresy just as very few would see themselves as doing the devil's work the average bishop from North America or Canada who has been promoting the opening up of the Anglican communion to full acceptance of homosexual relationships believes that they are doing what God wants they focus on God's character of love but to the exclusion of other parts of God's truth for instance his holiness his call to repent of that sort of live it lifestyle they focus on God's God's character of love and their understanding of the God is therefore twisted to the point where they fail to see the damage that they do to ordinary believers who are struggling to live for Christ it's a sobering thought as we think how to deal with the issues they represent and how to deal with them as individuals but as for us and our leaders well our attitudes to our opponents needs to be one of love no matter how aggressive ruthless or antagonistic people may become towards us but this is so hard when we are addressing heartfelt and critical issues of belief for

Christians not least when the personal attack stings our pride the temptation will always be to get angry as we see what God is saying being ignored and of course in a heartbeat grace can fly out of the window but we need to be Christians who keep the long view just imagine how wonderful it would be if the Lord reached out to all in the Anglican communion who are so far from him and open their hearts and minds to the grace and truth offered in his gospel bringing them to repentance and faith well I'm going to pray now but in a few minutes we're going to be ending and at the bottom of the sheets you've given in on the way in you'll see three questions now the good news about ending so early is that we actually get to have coffee without the children running around causing havoc and devastation the aim is that this is a chance for us to actually talk about this with each other why not make it your mission to talk to at least two or three different people before you leave about each of these questions and see what together you can learn from what we've been hearing today from God's word when the children return no doubt havoc will be restored as normal and we'll all run out of any thought or time to do such thing but let us pray father in our pride we often fail you so impressively in our fear father we hesitate to stand up for you in our self-righteousness we fail to realize when we fail to live your truth for ourselves and in our self-centeredness when opposition comes we grandstand and argue we ask father that you would show us and all who lead us your truth that you would guide them into it give them confidence to teach it please give them holiness in their lives and the strength to flee the temptations of the world around them and father we ask that you would grant all who lead us wisdom in when to stand up for your truth and when an issue is not at the heart of your gospel we ask these things in your son's name amen