

The Church: Guardian of the Truth (Part 3)

Committing the Task to Faithful Men, Able to Teach Others

Due to the effects of sin,¹ one of the most important aspects of guarding the truth is the raising up of others to bear this responsibility (especially the next generation). The Apostle Paul, like the Lord Jesus before him,² clearly understood this necessity. This is especially evident in his letters to Timothy and Titus, traditionally called the Pastoral Epistles. These letters were written in the last years of Paul's life and were primarily intended to guide and encourage these men in their ministry to the churches of Asia Minor (Timothy) and the island of Crete (Titus). In the process, Paul left specific instruction to the generations who would follow concerning how to carry out their calling with reference to the truth. We will consider these instructions as they appear in each letter.

First Timothy: Training the next generation to promote and guard the truth

Contrary to the assertion of some that Paul would not begin his letter to his "son" Timothy with such official language as "*an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God our Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope,*"³ we would argue that this statement is consistent with his other letters, both to individuals and to churches.⁴ Furthermore, it reveals Paul's self-conscious understanding of his office and authority as one called and sent by God to promote and guard the truth.⁵ This is evident in statements such as "*according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust. And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry*"⁶ and "*for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle -- I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying -- a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.*"⁷ Notice that the phrases "*putting me into the ministry*" and "*appointed*"⁸ denote God's sovereign calling, and the phrase "*enabled me*" speaks of the God given ability to fulfill that calling. He was not only called to the office of apostle, but that he must preach and teach that which was committed to his trust (i.e. *the glorious gospel of the blessed God*). It was on the basis of this authority that Paul wrote this letter in the first place.

Not only Paul, but Timothy as well had been called and authorized to proclaim and guard the truth. Paul understood and acknowledged this point in a number of ways throughout his letter. As a matter of fact, the church in general and the Reformed church in particular, have been guided by these elements in the examination and ordination of ministers ever since. They include:

- 1) The testimony of a good profession of faith before many witnesses (1 Tim 6:12). Before a candidate is taken under care of Classis, his church through the Consistory must certify his profession of faith and godly life as well as his giftedness for the ministry.

¹ "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23)

² See Matt. 28:18-20

³ 1 Tim. 1:1

⁴ See 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1; Romans 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1, Gal. 1:1; etc.

⁵ Rev. George Knight, in his excellent commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, summarized what Paul understood by his use of the phrase "apostle of Jesus Christ" as follows: a) he was directly appointed by Jesus Christ and empowered and authorized by him; b) he was an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ; c) he was a foundation stone of the church along with the prophets as a bearer of the gospel and of God's revelation; and d) he was first in leadership and authority in the church along with the other apostles. (The Pastoral Epistles: a Commentary on the Greek Text by George W. Knight III, Eerdmans Publishing Company, (Grand Rapids, Mich.), pg. 58)

⁶ 1 Tim. 1:11-12

⁷ 1 Tim. 2:7

⁸ or "ordained" as is found in the King James Version

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- 2) The testing and validation of the candidate's theological and practical knowledge of the Scriptures and the doctrines contained therein (1 Tim. 4:6-16). Classis examines the candidate in a number of areas of doctrine and life to ascertain the candidate's fitness for ministry.
- 3) The formal ordination including the charge given to the minister (1 Tim. 1:18) and the symbolic transfer of authority through the laying on of hands by the Presbytery (i.e. Elders, see 1 Tim. 4:14).

Though Paul understood Timothy's position and authority in the church, through this letter he continued to direct and instruct Timothy concerning his responsibility to confront and overturn false teaching (chapters 1, 4, and 6) as well as the positive proclamation of the truth in doctrine and in life (the rest of the letter). In essence, through this letter, he passes on his authority to Timothy and to those who serve the church with him, (i.e. the overseers/elders and deacons - see chapter 3). One term in particular that Paul used to communicate this act of transfer was the term translated "charge."⁹ He used it in direct reference to Timothy (1:18; 6:13) as well as concerning what Timothy should do in regards to others (1:3; 4:11; 5:7; 6:17). Even the very ending of the letter contains a charge "*O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge.*"¹⁰ This letter, therefore, could be viewed as the preparation for the passing on of the baton of authority to the next generation of the church.

This letter contains one particular passage that clearly teaches that the church is God's primary means of promoting and protecting the truth. Unfortunately, it has been misinterpreted by those who would deny that this responsibility continues in the visible church. The passage is found in chapter 3 and follows the qualification for the offices of overseer/elder and deacon. Paul expected to return to Ephesus in the near future but in case he was delayed, he wrote; "*if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*"¹¹ Mr. Harold Camping has taught¹² that the phrase, "*the pillar and ground of the truth,*" cannot be applied to the church because it would then contradict Ephesians 2:20 in which Paul declared that the church is "*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.*" He argues that instead of the organized, visible church, it is God Himself that is the pillar and ground of the truth. Thus this passage does not speak to the continuing necessity and responsibility of the church to promote and guard the truth. But is this interpretation correct? We would strongly disagree with this attempt to undermine the real intent of this passage.

First, the overall context of this passage is the establishing of church officers (3:1-13) and includes a summary of the truth in what some understand as an early creedal statement (3:16). Immediately following we find a warning against false teaching that will arise "*in the latter times*" (4:1-3). Paul's statement that the church is "*the pillar and ground of the truth*" is consistent with both the immediate as well as the overall context. Second, the passage under consideration is a directive to Timothy that he would "*conduct himself*"¹³ properly "*in the house of God*". The rest of the verse does not stand on its own, but is a support or an expansion on this phrase. If it be argued that the terms "pillar" and "ground" are not the same gender in the Greek as the term "church" and that therefore they do not

⁹ παραγγελλω

¹⁰ 1 Tim. 6:20

¹¹ 1 Tim. 3:15

¹² The following is based upon the testimony of a number of former members of the Alameda Reformed Bible Church. Mr. Camping taught this interpretation of 1 Tim. 3:15 during an Adult Sunday School class.

¹³ the King James Version has "behave thyself"

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modify it, we must again point out that the controlling phrase is “the house of God” and not “the church of the living God” and the gender of the term “house” is in agreement with at least one of these modifiers.¹⁴ If it be argued on theological grounds that the term “ground” cannot be applied to the church, we must bear in mind that this word is only found in this verse in the New Testament and rarely elsewhere. Whatever English gloss or nuances we use, it should not be used as the sole basis of our understanding of the entire phrase or verse. The Greek word *hedraioma* translated “ground” could, according to Friberg’s Lexicon, just as well be translated “mainstay” or “support.” Furthermore, Dr. Kelly in his commentary of the Pastoral Epistles translates this word as “buttress.” He writes;

“What Paul is saying is that it is the function and responsibility of each congregation to support, bolster up, and thus safeguard the true teaching by its continuous witness. We should note (a) that **buttress** is probably a more accurate rendering of the Greek *hedraioma* (nowhere else found) than ‘foundation’ or ‘ground’ (AV), and (b) that the local church is described as **a pillar** etc., not ‘the pillar, etc.’, because there are many local churches throughout the world performing this role”¹⁵

He later added; “Paul’s sole concern is to emphasize that the members of each local community should be a strong bulwark of the gospel against the assaults of false teachers.”¹⁶ The use of the term “buttress” or “bulwork”¹⁷ alleviates the concern stated earlier and further is consistent with the context. In essence, Paul states that the church, founded firmly on the Word of God (Eph.2:20) functions as a pillar (something that promotes or lifts up for all the world to see) and a bulwark of (something that supports, guards, and protects) the truth. Third, note well Dr. Kelly’s insight concerning the lack of the definite article before both “pillar” and “bulwark.” This lack creates a greater problem for those who would argue that these modifiers refer to “the living God,” for Paul would then be saying that God is “a pillar and a bulwark,” not “the pillar and the bulwark.” On the other hand, no difficulty arises if Paul is simply referring to the church. To bring the discussion of verse 15 to a close, it would be beneficial to consider Calvin’s comments on this verse:

“The reason why the Church is called the “pillar of truth” is, that she defends and spreads it by her agency. God does not himself come down from heaven to us, nor does he daily send angels to make known his truth; but he employs pastors, whom he had appointed for that purpose... For the same reason, also, she is called “the pillar of truth;” because the office of administering doctrine, which God hath placed in her hands, is the only instrument of preserving the truth, that it may not perish from the remembrance of men. Consequently this commendation relates to the ministry of the word; for if that be removed, the truth of God will fall to the ground... Accordingly in reference to men, the Church maintains the truth, because by preaching the Church proclaims it, because she keeps it pure and entire, because she transmits it to posterity.”¹⁸

To summarize thus far, we must remember that one of the main reasons that Paul wrote this letter was his concern for false teaching that had arisen and that would arise in the future. This was the reason

¹⁴ Consider also that these modifiers are structural terms more closely related to a building metaphor than to the phrase “the living God”.

¹⁵ *The Pastoral Epistles*, A & C Black (Publishers) Limited, London, 1960, pg. 88.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ As the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible translate it.

¹⁸ *Calvin’s Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1996, pg. 90-91 _

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he left Timothy in Ephesus (1:3). This was the reason for his charge to Timothy that “*you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck.*”¹⁹ This was also the reason for establishing officers in the church because false teaching would arise “*in the latter times.*”²⁰ Praise be to God that He has called and equipped the visible, organized church to promote and defend the truth against all enemies, within and without the church!

Titus: ordaining elders in a missionary setting to promote and guard the truth

Turning now to Paul’s letter to Titus, we are confronted with a different situation from that which Timothy faced in Ephesus. Paul left Titus among the newly established churches on the island of Crete to “*set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.*”²¹ Due to this missionary setting and the need of transformation in the lives of the Cretan believers, he wrote this letter. Note again Paul’s opening greeting and in particular his reference to his calling and authority. He refers to himself as a “*a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ*”(1:1) and that the gospel “*was committed to me according to the commandment of God our Savior*” (1:3). Based upon this delegated authority from Jesus Christ, Paul reminded Titus that he (Titus) was empowered or authorized to “*set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city*” as well. Paul’s authority, received from Christ, has been delegated to Titus, who in turn was directed to authorize elders in every city.

In relations to what we have considered previously, note also the reason Paul gives for ordaining elders. After presenting a number of qualifications that are mainly concerned with the character and virtues of a godly life, Paul adds “*holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict*” (1:9). The elders must hold fast the faithful word according to the teaching which was taught by Christ and the apostles (2 Thess. 2:15) in order that they may be able (2 Tim. 3:15-17) to exhort and convince (reprove or rebuke (v.13)) those who speak against sound doctrine. George Knight does an excellent job of summarizing the qualifications and their purpose for in verses 6 through 9 thus:

“Vv. 6-9 have presented the qualifications for an elder/overseer, God’s steward. Such a person must be above reproach in his Christian life in general and in these special qualifications. His family life must demonstrate his fidelity and leadership ability (v. 6). He must not be controlled by any of the besetting sins of self (v. 7). He must love both people and goodness and must be thoughtful and prudent, obedient to God’s law, seeking to please God, and self-controlled because he himself is controlled by God (v. 8). He must know and be zealously committed to the apostolic teaching and willing to teach it and to rebuke those who oppose it (v. 9). This last responsibility especially that of rebuking those who “speak against,” leads immediately into the next section and indicates the practical and necessary value of such leaders to the health and welfare of the congregation.”²²

There are many other aspects of this letter that we could mention, but we must now turn our attention to the final letter of the Pastoral Epistles and probably Paul’s last letter recorded in the New Testament, this is Second Timothy.

¹⁹ 1 Tim. 1:18-19

²⁰ 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 6:3-5, 20:21

²¹ Tit. 1:5

²² Knight, pg. 294

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Second Timothy: Passing on the baton of authority to the next generation

As we examine this letter, we encounter the fact that Paul believed that his time on earth was drawing to a close. This being the case, what would be the focus of his attention in his final hours? We learn that in life and in death, his single desire and focus was to glorify God by fulfilling his God given calling. Listen to the heart of this man of God; *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”*²³

Unlike his first letter to Timothy, Paul’s concern was not primarily the church that Timothy was currently serving, but with Timothy himself. Timothy, like Joshua the son of Nun before him, was facing a future without the guidance of his trusted leader. He struggled with fear and timidity, therefore Paul was quick to encourage his protégé by reminding him of the day that Timothy was set apart for the ministry (1:6-7, c.f. 1 Tim. 4:14). Furthermore, again and again he exhorts Timothy to *“hold fast,” “be strong in the Lord,” “endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ,” “put them in remembrance,” “study to show thyself approved unto God,”* etc. In the midst of these exhortations, Paul outlined for all posterity the process of preparation of future church leaders for their responsibility to promote and guard the truth. In chapter 2, verse 2 we read; *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* Note the fourfold process; 1) Paul (heard from me), 2) Timothy (commit), 3) faithful men who will be able to teach, and 4) others also.

Finally, Paul did not forget the dangers that Timothy and the church faced, on the contrary he exhorted him to *“prepare!” “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.”*²⁴ And *“I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”*²⁵ We must not forget that these words were not written for Timothy’s sake alone, but for the succeeding generations as well.

Conclusion

We have seen that through the Pastoral Epistles, God prepared His church to fulfill her ongoing calling to promote and guard the truth. In the next article, we will focus on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to continue to use the church for this end.

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²³ 2 Tim. 4:6-8

²⁴ 2 Tim. 2:15-16

²⁵ 2 Tim. 4:1-5