

A WORD TO THE HERETICS

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Dr. George O. Wood

Timothy speaks:

I've seen so many changes I'd hardly know where to begin to describe them. I understand your modern inventions have brought you many things but have not necessarily increased the quality of life. Things were invented. Like, people couldn't check on what degree the sundial was standing on to know when things would be through. Even though you measure time, I'm not sure you enjoy time any better just because you can measure it. You have speeded up communication enormously. You talk to each other rather quickly through the telephone. But just because you've speeded up communication doesn't mean you've improved it. You might miss something we had, that is, walking to the place where the church meets. There's a great deal of talk and conversation that prepares our hearts. I guess you can't do that.

I do miss, however, the dirtiness of our streets. You have such a clean city, clean streets. It keeps your feet so clean. But this improvement has kept you from knowing one another in a very personal way through the washing of feet. That brings you much closer to each other. But I must go on to other things.

Some of you have wondered if the preservation of my letters—the letters that Paul has written to me—constitute an accident. Was it just by chance that these letters and other letters of the Gospels and the Revelation merge into what you know as the New Testament? I would say that we only see one phase of the Holy Spirit's work in the Scripture, and that was in the inspiration of the Scripture. I feel confident when we had a letter from Paul that seemed like an authentic word, the Holy Spirit functioned in them giving him inspiration and teaching and understanding.

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We did not see the other processes the Holy Spirit had, that is, the process of collections whereby all of these would be gathered together in one volume. In our time they were individual letters or individual Gospels. How tremendous it is to see that the Holy Spirit has collected these all together.

Not only that, but to see another phase of His work in preserving what is there. You sometimes think that the Holy Spirit was only for the apostolic age. But you must recognize that even in this small process the Holy Spirit has been actively at work in the collection and in the preservation.

Much more, the Holy Spirit is at work in the application of these words to our life.

As you look at Paul's letter to me in what you call the first chapter, you'll find that his letter to me begins with some words of greeting. This of course is customary for letters and correspondence in our day. As I see your modern correspondence, I'm somewhat amused that you put the name of the person who sends the letter last. It'd take you sometime to read the letter to find out who wrote it. But not with us. Again, I think there are aspects of our civilization immensely superior to what's going on.

You'll find that brother Paul introduces himself at the beginning. He calls himself "apostle." If you carefully look through the letters that Paul sent to the churches and individuals, you will find that he does not use the word "apostle" in four letters he wrote. He does not use the term when he writes to the Philippians. Nor does he use it in the two occasions he writes to the Thessalonians. And he does not use it when he writes to Philemon. However he uses the term "apostle" to me and Titus and to the other churches he wrote. The reason is somewhat obvious. He does not refrain from using the term "apostle" where his authority is quite clearly in question. At Philippi the saints loved him, and he did not have to establish his authority. At Thessalonica there was a great love and acceptance of him. Therefore he did not need to employ the title. And

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Philemon accepted Paul's insight in regard to the runaway slave Onesimus. So it was not necessary to use the title. But in the churches where teaching had particularly emerged to subvert or undermine the authority of Paul, it was necessary for him at the beginning to remind the church of the authority from God. That indeed the Lord Jesus Christ had commissioned him as an authoritative teacher and source of wisdom within the church. Therefore Paul was designated by the Lord himself to teach as the Lord taught.

Where it was possible, Paul did not use a title. Where it was necessary, he did. It wasn't necessary from my point of view. I knew he was an apostle, but there were many in the church at Ephesus that questioned his authority and, indeed, my authority.

There was a refrain from the use of titles wherever possible. As I was talking to your pastor about titles that had been afforded him, we agreed that the titles weren't really worth anything at all in reference to the ministry. The title "Reverend" or "Doctor" is kind of a useless terminology. People were not going to be drawn to the gospel or turned off from the gospel simply because of the title in front of a name. Brother Paul expressed it to the Thessalonian believers, "Our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

But in the church today you see a great deal of this going on and it concerns me. I see brethren who are searching for a title and recognition. You must always look at the source of what makes the gospel powerful. The source is the blessed Holy Spirit. And the source is the Word of God, which makes the gospel believable. So whenever titles can be avoided, they're avoided. When necessary he uses it and reminds the church of it.

In writing to me, Paul says that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ by command. We should pause a moment on the word "command." It is reflected so much in his correspondence to me. Whether

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it's the word "command" or another term "I charge." It's used on numerous occasions, simply meaning, in a military sense, to give orders that are meant to be carried out. I have been in a position most of my life of receiving orders from the apostle Paul and in turn communicating those orders to others. It is easy to receive orders from a person who himself is living under authority. I have never had occasion to question the orders I have received.

He further indicates he is under command of God our Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope. If you'd carefully look through Paul's other correspondence, you'd find only to Titus and to me does Paul use the term in reference to God—God our Savior. Usually it's used to reference Christ. But we must avoid any further thinking that God the Father is waiting to judge us, and Jesus Christ is hoping to save us, and they're set in opposition to one another—so that Jesus Christ saves you from the Father. You must see, instead, God's great love, which John spoke of when he said God loved the world so much He gave His Son.

You might wonder why it is that previously brother Paul did not employ this term "God our Savior" in reference to God. But it should strike you that the time that he wrote to me, after his release from prison, was a time when another word was common on the lips of men. Many were saying "Nero, our savior." Paul reminds us, as well as you, that God alone saves—that salvation resides not in any human savior or political potentate.

And it's Jesus Christ our hope. You think our hope is generally connected with a future event that has a degree of uncertainty. Just because you hope, it does not mean it will come to pass. Worldly hope is based to a certain degree on uncertainty. But when we speak of Jesus Christ our hope we can speak of something which is future—meeting Jesus Christ our Lord—not as something which is uncertain, but a hope which must take place or of which there is no doubt. Incredible it is to recognize over these past centuries of the existence of the church—something

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we never saw in the first generation—the time would have gone this long without the Lord's return. But to see how many times hope has met those who laid on beds of sickness or those who have carried their loved ones to the gravesite and the words of brother Paul have been read: "We do not sorrow as those who have no hope." And recognize the present character and reality of the future as it moves in on the present need—Jesus our hope is your hope today.

Paul sends the letter, he addresses it to me. It's brought by personal courier. You'll notice Paul calls me "his true child in the faith." I had a special relationship with him. He was really a spiritual father to me. Modern people are wonderfully methodical. You have a method or invention for everything and a way of getting something done more quickly and with mass production. I have seen that you train ministers a great deal like you produce automobiles. You put them through kind of an assembly line. They go through a regimen of classes and lectures and tests and books, and they come out with a degree. Then they're in the ministry.

We were a little more antiquated than that. Although I'm sure we could profit from some of your improvements, but our concept was the life of a minister is not only taught but it is caught. And it can only be caught if a younger minister is working with fathers in the gospel. My learning did not only occur from a book and hearing brother Paul lecture. But it occurred also as I watched him live through most of his life. Your young ministers not only need teachers, but they need fathers. Paul tells me some things that come to me from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, grace and mercy and peace. What he's doing here is before he writes he gives a benediction. You must recognize as you read Paul's letters that he's an extremely tactful person. If he knows there's a problem to be dealt with in a church or situation, he'll not begin by addressing himself to the problem. But instead he'll begin by praising the Lord. Finding

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something he can commend. Build on something right and good. He gives this blessing of grace and mercy and peace.

Those words were new to us, but they're old to you, a cliché. But they weren't to us. In fact I think sometimes you assume things to be true. And because you assume them to be true, you don't face them.

Grace and mercy and peace are always God's will for the other person. God's grace comes directly from God. It's not your own. It's God's generosity demonstrated in our lives. God's peace puts it together. In Paul's correspondence the word always follows grace. It never comes before, because you can never have well-being in your life until you experience God's grace.

Paul gives an additional word not found in any other of his readings. That's the word "mercy."

When you think of mercy you can't think of it as an abstract concept. You can't understand mercy unless it is mingled with concreteness. Mercy is an abstract concept that can never be realized unless you get the story of the Good Samaritan, for example. So when Paul says to me, for example, "God's mercy to you," I know that when he says that, that God's mercy is going to come to me in a particular instance, a particular situation. I will find God's help present. I need God's mercy as you need God's mercy in daily affairs where we require help.

Brother Paul talked about the matter of heresy within our church at Ephesus. You shouldn't read this letter and get the idea that all the Christians were involved in false doctrines. That would not be true. But when he described the founding of the church at Ephesus, thousands of believers were added to the Lord. The preaching involves some of the peripheral elements. But nevertheless some persons are deviating from the faith and they need to be dealt with.

As you read through this first chapter of Paul's correspondence to me you'll find basically that there are three kinds of heresies that are present. The speculator, so to speak. The emphasis on

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myths and genealogy. And then there are those who are so-called teachers of the law who really don't have authority to speak although they try to make themselves sound very learned and pious and dignified. Then also there are those who taught the doctrine of the guilty conscience. They have set an example in this matter. Brother Paul, writing to this belief, says, "I must stay at Ephesus and deal with this situation. Remain," he says.

Paul refers to me as a somewhat timid person. I never did like to go to Corinth when Paul sent me there because it was tough for me to personally engage in all the problems they were having. But I'm to remain and wrestle with the whole thing.

We found that when a person comes to Christ he has so entrenched in his faith that all the ideas in his mind have not yet been transformed. He still brings some of the pagan ideas and myths with him. It was necessary and still is, to help in the cleansing of his mind from the myths, the idle speculations of the pagans. And also there were some of the Jewish brethren who delighted in fanciful interpretation of Scripture. You could give them the most obscure passage and they would get out of it an oasis. You could give them a name—a genealogy—and they would make up a great story, and through the story communicate doctrine and all sorts of fanciful and delightful talks.

What I found was happening was this was not simply something to be treated lightly. What it was doing, the persons who got involved in this got on an intellectual knowledge trip. Their goal was to see who knew the in-most story. It got to be a discussion group. Care needs to be exercised (coming back to the contemporary church). There's a tremendous thing happening in talking to one another. But I fear that some of the talk tends to be talk for talk's sake. It has no originating person. It produces no clear effect in terms of your spiritual growth or evangelism. The goal of conversation should not become more conversation or more knowledge for an

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intellectual trip. But to produce godliness. Our aim, as Paul delivers it, is aimed towards love.

Our aim is not to see how much we know but how well we can love. It's important to have right beliefs but it's not important at all to be involved in all kinds of speculations.

Remember, Paul is not dealing with out-and-out heresies. You have cults that we knew nothing of. Our heresy was from the context within the body of Christ. We are trying to win these people back into full fellowship. They have not yet denied cardinal doctrines of the faith. Our purpose is not to chase them out of the church but to chase their ideas out and keep them in.

They're involved in speculations, which are not right. Coming back in the true church, there are those involved in speculations. I've found some excess in speculation in regard to eschatology and future events and the second coming of the Lord. Persons are madly selling books that I'm not sure are promoting godly living but selling books and promoting scare techniques.

Remember, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The proper ministry is one that proceeds from a pure heart and good conscience and sincere faith.

A pure heart is a person whose motives are right. A minister with a good conscience is one who can live with himself. You are a minister of God as well, and you live in a world of others, your family, and you—where the family does not know you or the world does not know you. It is in that world that we are to know ourselves in such a way that, in effect, we could look at ourselves as though in a mirror and the image which comes back to us is one that causes us no pain. No sense of remorse. No sense of hypocrisy. But one which springs from a clean and clear conscience. We are to have a nonhypocritical faith, a sincere faith.

The way, of course, to deal with speculators is to have the kind of example lived before them which Paul has admonished me to set and which he himself set. Don't get caught up in ideas for ideas' sake. Get caught up in service for the Lord.

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Then there were also at the church of Ephesus, as you see here, those who were teachers of the law who really didn't know the law. I have found that this thing has been repeated. Some persons who appear to come off as very learned inundate a congregation or group of people with knowledge, but when you pierce behind to try to figure out what their words are saying there is no meaning. They are simply words, which are choice words, but there is no truth coming through the words. There is nothing worse than a dogmatic person who does not have the background to enable him to be dogmatic. Paul tells these teachers of the law, who were no doubt sincere, that they shouldn't be all caught up in making their doctrine the application of the Law for Christians because really, Christians don't need the Law. The Law is for those who are living without God. Paul goes on to categorize them.

As you read brother Paul, you'll find that he writes as he speaks, if you'd ever heard him speak. But he had such a gifted mind he found it very difficult to operate within the kind of structure your pastor does—the three-point outline. He'd get a thought and tend to get carried away with it for a while. He'd construct long sentences, which had all kinds of dangling modifiers and prepositions and whatever they were. He's doing it again with me. He starts off by telling of teachers of the Law. Then he's got to take the time to indicate to the Ephesian church that he's not against the Law. Then he says, in effect, that the Law didn't ever do me any good; it was the grace of Jesus Christ, which saved me.

So you'll see in your verses 8–17 that what brother Paul has done is go off track for a short period of time to do a parenthesis. What he's saying is, Jesus Christ has had great mercy upon him, a man who sought to do the Law but who could not ever be faithful to it. Yet he received mercy. He who'd broken the Law received mercy. He who blasphemed God received an overflowing of mercy. Brother Paul was always able to say that he had been the chiefest of

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sinners. Of that we have no doubt. But yet with persons like myself who were brought to Christ who'd never had the spectacular background as Paul, seeing that the grace of God could save the worst always gave me the confidence that it could save me. If the Lord could save him, then surely He can save me.

And also when brother Paul is done with his testimony he erupts in a doxology: "To the king of the ages, immortal, invisible and only God be honor and glory for ever and ever." When you think about what God has done for you, you can't help but erupt in praise. You charismatic believers, I notice that you continually use the phrase "praise the Lord." This is wonderful. You must praise the Lord, but I'd urge you to also extend your vocabulary. Sometime when you feel particularly happy or blessed say, "To the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." You need more vocabulary in your praying. So that each expression, instead of slipping into something that might be trite, will keep a freshness of meaning.

One of the other heresies you'll find at Ephesus is there were those who violated conscience. I found it sometimes a distasteful thing for me to confront persons who were teaching other doctrines. That's why Paul needs to tell me to think back about the prophetic utterances, which were upon me at my ordination. That from them I should draw a reservoir of strength. I should look back to see what God has promised to do in my ministry. There's a tremendous thing of treasuring an experience you've had with God, that when you're in the depth of struggle or depression you need to look back upon what special way the Lord ministered to you in the past and draw strength from the memory of that experience.

That's what Paul expects me to do in relation to the difficult matter of Hymenaeus and Alexander, who were two brothers who were teachers in our midst who went off the track by

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denying their conscience and engaging in immoral practices and thought nothing of it. Of course, we pursued the method of discipline with them. One of our body went to talk with them. They did not change their way. Two of our body went to talk with them. They did not change. The matter was brought before the church, and they still did not change their way. The last resort we had in the practice was certainly more common with us than it was with you, and that is pray that the person would be delivered to Satan for the destruction of his flesh that his spirit might be saved in the day of Jesus Christ. What, in effect, we were doing through this prayer was saying, “Lord, take Your protective hand off their life in terms of health and protection so that through some physical chastisement they might come to a recognition of Your grace.” It’s sort of a punishment of last resort.

I was asking your pastor how you discipline members today, whether you do this or not. He told me you didn’t. That the possibility exists with your government that somebody might sue you for libel if you did. But beyond that, you seem to have a rather unique method of church discipline which isn’t discipline but it’s transfer. That when a member becomes dissatisfied or ill at ease with other members he simply kind of drifts away and becomes a part of another body of believers. Therefore the problem is never dealt with because he’s gone before you deal with it. Some of you are wondering why it is, as you read Paul’s correspondence—whether to me or in other parts of the New Testament—why it is that the apostle does not ever really deal with matters pertaining to other religions. You’ll not find him attacking other religions or examining their philosophy or theology. Instead, you’ll find the apostle really dealing with groups that have risen in the church that are teaching a different doctrine than was taught by Christ and the apostles.

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Let me share a couple of perspectives on that. Our task primarily, in terms of teaching in regard to those things which were false, was to address ourselves to those who were using the name of Jesus Christ, claiming to belong to Him, yet were teaching things which were not taught or what He taught the apostles to teach. In effect, we were having what you would call a brand-name problem. It is we who have the term “Christians.” Others emerged which began to use the term and did not agree with what the term meant. But they nevertheless used it freely. We needed to focus in on that.

In fact, the word “Christian” has been so adulterated that hardly anyone in the world knows what it means. And that, of course, is the strategy of the enemy, to confuse and adulterate a term. I find even that there are some people who say that it was the Christians who were responsible for the death of six million Jews and even that Adolph Hitler was a Christian. I can’t imagine Paul countenancing that for a moment! No. A Christian is that person who gives himself to the Lord Jesus Christ and comes in under the submission to the doctrine and the fellowship of the apostle. Why is it we were not successful to putting an end to heresy? You still have heresies today, and some in a much more potent and viral form and sophisticated and deceitful form even than we had. Why is it that you still have them? Why did we not put an end to them?

One easy reason is force was never an option for us. If we had had force we could have put an end to heretics, but we never sought force. We never will seek force. I think there are two main reasons we didn’t put an end to heresy. One is a basic dishonesty, or in some cases a delusion, on the part of those who taught the heresy. Apostolic faith is based upon the truth, the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His teaching. That which is not apostolic, no matter how nicely it looks and sounds, if it is in disagreement with what the apostles taught has as a central feature of

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its theology a basic lie. It is impregnated with deceit. The term “Christian” has been used to speak of a whole structure of church life, which is basically apostate.

There are many wonderful and beautiful people, in terms of their moral living, who are involved in groups which are teaching wrong things. But it’s still, when you get down to it, it’s a matter of truth. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then indeed it makes what He has said the final court of appeal for all men. When any religious teacher contradicts what He has taught or what He taught the apostles, then that teaching must be repudiated. But the person must not be repudiated. The person must be loved.

I see also a reason for continued heresies is that Satan is very active and present in the world.

The Lord said he would be, and I see that he is. I could easily tell you what is going to happen on the religious scene as the end of the age comes. Satan’s strategy is to confuse the minds of the world by multiplying religious cults, religious sects, and what-all. Then, finally, persons will say one way is as good as another. And therefore they do not just have one way and put everything together. So ultimately, through this strategy of confusion, he’ll produce a unification of religion, and it will be united under one person, an end-time ruler who will be apostate and will be called the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition, the antichrist. That’s where religion is going.

But do you realize for every movement he has, the Lord has a counter movement? With his attempt to bring things into a unity of unbelief, the Lord is bringing things into a unity of belief, so that even some of the old differences which separated believer from believer in another generation will not do so now.

Why is it that we never seriously fought other religions in the sense of tearing down their theology or trying to do a comparative religion study? I guess it’s a very simple answer. Not that you shouldn’t do it now, but for us the first, the second generation, it really wasn’t necessary

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because we knew. I'd talked to persons who had physically seen Jesus after He had risen from the dead. We knew that He was risen from the dead. Therefore there is no need to waste our time in seeing what someone else believes. What we needed to do was announce the message: Jesus Christ is risen. Knowing that since He is risen that could be the only true message in the world. There was never a doubt. And there never is now. Jesus Christ is still the answer.