

The Proper Use of the Law



A CHARACTERISTIC OF THE Apostle Paul's writings is digression. In the middle of an argument, a word or allusion will suggest an important thought—and Paul will take off on the subject. But his digressions are always relevant. Paul has been encouraging Timothy to put an end to the work of false teachers in Ephesus, and he says of them that they desire “to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” (v. 7). With this mention of their misuse of the law, he digresses in verses 8–11 on the proper use of the law. A review of Paul's concerns and purpose in writing to Timothy will help us better understand his thinking in this section.

Paul's Concern

Apostasy's speed. The threat of wholesale apostasy in Ephesus drove Paul at the time he wrote this letter. His concern was well-founded because of the speed with which apostasy had come to some of the elder-led congregations in Ephesus. It had only been four years since his famous farewell address to the Ephesian elders in which he had warned them saying, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29, 30). And now it was dreadfully true.

Unbelievable! The Ephesian church had drunk from the pure stream of apostolic teaching. There could be no better water than that! God's Word from a writer of God's Word! In today's terms they did not drink merely from the tap but from the apostolic fire hose—for three years. They had even had the grandest ecclesiastical letter of the New Testament written personally to them. But within forty-eight months of Paul's farewell, apostasy had come.

Sadly, the Ephesians were not unique on the apostolic landscape. Only six verses into his letter to the Galatians, Paul had exploded, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one” (Galatians 1:6, 7a). Perhaps his experience with the rapid demise of the Galatians fueled his warning to the Ephesian elders.

In any event, both cases make concrete the sobering reality that gospel ministries nourished from the well of God's Word can become apostate with amazing speed. This reality is a plaintive refrain in 1 Timothy: “Some have made shipwreck of their faith” (1:19). “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (4:1). “For some have already strayed after Satan” (5:15). “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (6:10). And the final verse of the book bemoans those who “have swerved from the faith” (6:21).

Should our concern be any less today? Absolutely not! If anything, given Paul's experience, the repeated record of church history, and recent events in the evangelical church, our vigilance must be even

greater. It is a solemn fact that any given church can depart from the faith in less than a generation. To imagine otherwise is to be so inflated with the helium of naive pride that we imagine we are above the human condition and that of the church itself, impervious to what happens in life and history. The truth is, apostasy can easily happen to any of us if we do not guard against it and stay close to Christ.

My own evangelical awareness parallels the rise of Evangelicalism in American culture. In 1948 I was taken by my grandmother to hear Billy Graham preach in a great tent on Figueroa Street in Los Angeles. I was born again in 1955 and felt the disdain of my former mainline church. In retrospect, it was probably more fear than disdain because it, like the other liberal churches in town, was shrinking as evangelical churches grew. I was a youth pastor in the 1960s. My uniform was sandals, bell-bottoms, and flowered shirts. “Groovy!” I participated in a huge harvest of souls in those tumultuous years. The year 1974 was declared by *Time* magazine to be “The Year of the Evangelical.” And in the 1980s evangelical Christianity was in the driver’s seat of the American Protestant enterprise. Now, in the twenty-first century, with Evangelicalism at its crest, times have clearly changed.

In 1987 the University of Chicago Press published James Davison Hunter’s *Evangelicalism, the Coming Generation*, a survey of nine evangelical liberal arts colleges and seven evangelical seminaries that defined many of the changes. Regarding evangelical theology Dr. Hunter wrote: “There is less sharpness, less boldness, and, accordingly, a measure of opaqueness in their theological vision that did not exist in previous generations (at least to their present extent).”¹ Hunter further observes:

What is happening, however, is an alteration in the cultural meaning of orthodoxy and, accordingly, an alteration in the cultural meaning of specific criteria of orthodoxy. In each case there is a broadening of the meaning of some of Evangelicalism’s fundamental religious symbols. The meaning of such doctrines as the inerrancy/infallibility of Scripture, justification through Christ alone, and the nature and purpose of the Christian mission has become more inclusive. They mean more than they did even a generation or two ago. The cognitive boundaries of theological orthodoxy, once narrowly construed, become variously widened. Insofar as this is true, theological orthodoxy is reinterpreted; the tradition is redefined.²

A decade later Millard Erickson, Distinguished Professor of Theology at Baylor University’s Truett Seminary, wrote *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology*, in which he chronicles a redefining of three essential doctrines by some who wear the label *Evangelical*—namely, the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of God, and the doctrine of salvation.

We must take heed not to rest on the evangelical victories and achievements of recent years—history’s greatest evangelists, huge churches, overflowing schools and seminaries, cultural influence. We must remember that Ephesus was the lighthouse of Asia Minor. It was up to this point an apostolic success story. It had been evangelical in the purest sense of *evangelion* with its primary emphasis on the gospel and on mission. But the church at Ephesus was beginning to decay from the inside.

We must take to heart that 1 Timothy is imperative for us who know and serve Christ today. Sadly, there is widespread neglect of the Pastorals by evangelicals because of their being so direct in delicate matters such as church discipline, qualifications for leadership, and male and female roles. We evangelicals have also been subtly influenced by liberals’ rejection of the Pastorals on the false suppositions that they are “second-century,” “middle-class,” and “status quo.” The resulting neglect of the Pastorals by people of *the Book* is unconscionable. If we do not allow Scripture to define the church, the forces of culture will!

Apostasy’s immorality. Why had some of the Ephesian elders become teachers of false doctrine? The answer is implicit in the verse we examined in our last study. Namely, they had abandoned “love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (v. 5). Their false teaching had come

as a result of their moral decline. Doctrinal departure follows moral departure. Notice in verse 19 that Paul urges Timothy to hold “faith and a good conscience” and that “rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.” Also consider 4:1, 2: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”

How could Christians who had drunk from the supreme stream of apostolic gospel truth leave Christ and the gospel for “myths and endless genealogies” (1:4)? The answer is in verse 5: They had ceased to maintain purity of heart and a clear conscience. I have seen this happen in the lives and walk of friends who were once fellow soldiers but failed to keep their hearts clean, then fell away, and now believe doctrines contradictory to the gospel. When you fail to guard your conscience, you become open to the world, the flesh, and the devil—and thus prey to fanciful theology and heresy.

The battle for orthodoxy is lost not only in the head but in the heart. Apostasy begins at the very deepest level, when we trample our conscience. There is no doubt that some of us have inner places where we have ridden roughshod over our hearts, indulging ourselves at the expense of God’s work within us. In time, our love for God will fade, our heart and conscience will give in, and we will be shells of hypocrisy. Maintaining “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” is the primary battle for those who want to live for God.

Paul’s Purpose

Paul’s concern about apostasy in Ephesus was intimately connected with his purpose in writing to Timothy. The classic statement of his purpose is stated in 1 Timothy 3:15—“If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” Furthermore, the subject of church conduct and order runs through every chapter of his letter.

But there is also an underlying purpose (which many miss), stated in 2:3, 4—“This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Paul also used the phrase “God our Savior” in his opening greeting, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1:1). On the deepest level, 1 Timothy is not about church order but about the evangelization of the world! It is about a Savior who will save all who believe: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (4:9, 10). One’s *doctrine* and one’s *conduct* have everything to do with *evangelism*. “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (4:16).

When you see that Paul’s deepest concern is for “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” his digression in verses 8–11 makes sense. These errant, false-teaching elders had abandoned the outward proclamation and defense of the gospel and had turned inward, using, of all things, the law to promote their teaching.

The Use of the Law

Proper use. Paul opens his digression by saying, “Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully” (v. 8). In Romans 7:12 he gave his classic statement of the law’s goodness: “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” Despite the misunderstanding and errant teaching of some, there is no disjunction between the law and the gospel. Law and gospel rest on the same moral base, and they complement each other. People have always been saved by grace, whether living under the law or the gospel.

The law’s excellency affords three uses—a *restraining* use, a *condemning* use, and a *sanctifying* use. The *restraining* use of the law is seen in public life, as an external restraint on wrongdoers (cf.

Galatians 3:23—4:7). And it does a “good” (literally, *kalos*, “beautiful”) job of this. Without law, everyday public life would be impossible.

The *condemning* use of the law involves spiritual guilt and judgment (cf. Romans 7:7–25). Paul described his experience of this in Romans 7:13—“Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.” The law hammered Paul down, so that he might see his own sin and open himself to the gospel. John Stott quotes Martin Luther in this respect:

It is a mighty “hammer” to crush the self-righteousness of human beings. For “it shows them their sin, so that by the recognition of sin they may be humbled, frightened, and worn down, and so may long for grace and for the Blessed Offspring [Christ].” It is in this sense that “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.”³

The third use, that of *sanctifying*, involves defining the parameters of a graced life. No one can live up to the law, but it does lay out God’s mind as to our moral and ethical responsibilities toward God and man. We especially see its sanctifying work in Christ’s enlightening teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about it (Matthew 5:17ff.). That sermon also shows the condemning use of the law, which demands perfection (cf. Matthew 5:48), and calls the Christian to depend fully on God’s grace.

Improper use. But the false teachers in Ephesus were not making proper use of the law. Evidently they were abusing the law by making it out to be a means of righteousness.⁴ They represented the law’s standards as humanly attainable as they mixed the law with “genealogies” and “myths” (cf. 1:4). This caused believers in Ephesus to misunderstand and ignore God’s moral demands⁵ and, tragically, to abandon the gospel of grace.⁶

In the midst of the darkness of the heathen world, the errant elders should have been using the law to demonstrate to the unrighteous their deep spiritual need. Thus Paul says, “the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine” (vv. 9, 10). Paul concocted a grotesque list that begins with six general epithets and then luridly references the fifth through the ninth commands, which have to do with the way human beings abuse other human beings, then ends the list with, “and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine”—literally, “healthy doctrine.”⁷ The world is morally diseased and must be proclaimed to be condemned by the law.

Paul’s point is relentlessly clear: If you are going to proclaim the law in this dark, diseased world, do it as an entrance to preaching the gospel. These men were sitting around with a small group of self-righteous believers, weaving endless teachings into an imagined ladder to high spirituality. For these Ephesian elders, the church had become their mission field. This is fatal. When you begin making Christians your unreached people group, something is wrong.

A telling example of this occurred when a friend of mine was in the hospital. She was visited by another woman who, after being marvelously converted, fell into some narrow, cultish teaching. As they were talking, a nurse came in, and the patient began to talk with her. She was very attentive to the nurse and was obviously looking for an opportunity to share her faith. Her guest just sat there. After the nurse left, the visitor turned to the patient and said, “You are attempting to witness to her, aren’t you? Well, that’s good for you, but not for me. I’m not interested in that because God has given me the burden of helping Christians straighten out their lives.”

Certainly we must spend time discipling new believers, but when we lose our concern for the world and become burdened for Christians alone, we are headed for trouble.

Sound doctrine. Having mentioned “sound doctrine” or “healthy teaching” (v. 10), Paul added a description of it—“in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted” (v. 11). The gospel is the ultimate repository and expression of healthy teaching. Anything that moves away from it or dethrones it as the centerpiece of the church is diseased and dangerous. The gospel is especially good news when set against the backdrop of the bad news of humanity’s gross sinfulness. The good news is that Jesus died “for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers” (vv. 9, 10)—for you and me!

Gresham Machen, the great Princeton theologian and the founder of Westminster Seminary, understood this:

What good does it do me to tell me that the type of religion presented in the Bible is a very fine type of religion and that the thing for me to do is just to start practicing that type of religion now? . . . I will tell you, my friend. It does not one tiniest little bit of good. . . . What *I* need first of all is not exhortation but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news for me? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?⁸