

The Pillar (Part 3 of 6)

How to Split a Church

1 Timothy 1:6-11

Mark Vroegop

6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 understanding this, that 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, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, 11 in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Tim. 1:6-11 ESV).

I'm sure that you've heard this hand-motion and Sunday school statement before: "Here's the church. There's the steeple. Look inside and see all the people." In a simple and cute way, it helps a child to understand that the church is a building but it is really about the people. A church is a church because of the people.

When you are a child that seems rather neat, precious, and pristine – like a scene from Little House on the Prairie. But as you grow into an adult you learn that the church can often look like this: Here's the church. There's the steeple. Look inside at the fighting people. Thankfully, this is not always the case, but I can imagine that most of you who grew up in church have seen and heard things that have been hard to stomach, disappointing, or, in some cases, permanently scarring. It is sad but true: church can be really messy.

Why is that? Why is the church messy? It is because of us. People. I once heard Joe Stowell reflect on this difficult-people reality in the church when he said, "the church would be a cake-walk if it wasn't for working with people." I read an article recently about a church in Alabama in which a church dispute resulted in Music Pastor using a Taser on the Senior Pastor. Not a good Sunday. The church is at its best and its worst because of people. And not just any people. It is because of people like you and me.

Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to deal with problems in the church, and those problems were caused by people. He urges Timothy to guard the truth that leads to life, and this looks like dealing with particular people who were causing significant problems in the church. As we saw last week, Paul calls upon Timothy to help the church to stay on track – to watch out for bad leadership, false teaching, and the wrong focus.

How to Make a Mess in a Church

This week we are going to see a new level of detail as Paul identifies the intricacies of people and teaching that lead to big problems. In other words, he shows us the dynamics that lead to church division, splits, and controversies. I want you to see this material because, having been around the church for almost two decades, I've seen some clear patterns that are important to note.

If you are going to make a mess in a church, just do these three things:

- 1) Use the ministry for yourself
- 2) Be sloppy with the Scriptures
- 3) Neglect the Gospel

Let's look at these and at ourselves.

1. Use the ministry for yourself (vv 6-7)

In verse five we heard Paul talk about the right focus that the church should maintain and Timothy should emphasize: *"The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith."* Additionally, we learned that Paul is highlighting the importance of love and the fact that it comes out of the gospel – a forgiven heart, a cleansed conscience, and based upon true faith. However, there are problems in this church that needed to be addressed:

6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions (1 Tim. 1:6-7)

The first thing that we notice in verse six is the fact that the problem is not just ideas but people. In fact Paul says **"certain people."** At the end of chapter one we learn about two famous trouble-makers, Hymenaeus and Alexander, but it is clear that there are others who have been on the same path. Now the thing I want you to note here is the simple fact that church messes are caused by people. And do you know what is really scary? Every one of them were fully convinced that they were doing what was right, that it was God's will, and meanwhile they are destroying God's church. We should tremble at what a mess we can make in the church.

Secondly, we see what they did. They **"swerved away"** from love as the aim of the charge that issues from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. The result was that they wandered into vain discussions. The Greek word for "swerved away" means that they missed the mark or they deviated from the truth. Notice that this is not a whole-sale rejection of the faith; it is a small error that results in a bad trajectory. The effect of this swerving is a "wandering away into vain discussions." In other words they have lost their way, turned aside or, in medical terminology, they are out of joint. They've entered the "no-man's land" of vain discussions.

Not unlike a person who is lost, one bad turn leads to another and another and another. And then something else takes over – the battle between reality and pride. Think of the last time you were

lost – I mean seriously lost. No one ever intends to get lost; it is the secondary effect of other bad choices – like the couple who recently called 911 because they were in a corn maze with a baby(!) and the sun was setting. Additionally the further and further you go, the harder it is to admit that you are lost. And it is remarkable how bad things can get so quickly.

We get to the heart of the matter as to what is going on with this key phrase: **“desiring to be teachers of the law without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.”** Here is the motivational pay-dirt! The problem here is not just the false teaching; this thing took off because these teachers loved being the authorities. They loved the position of prominence. They loved the power of a crowd listening to them. They loved the sense of having little groupies or followers. They discovered that people would do what they said, and they loved it, not for God’s glory, but for their own. And do you know what is even more frightening? They had no idea what they were talking about.

Can this happen in a church? Absolutely! Do you think you could become like this? Sure you could. All that you have to do is believe something passionately, be fairly articulate, gain a few followers, be convinced that you are special, and start to make over-confident, self-promoting statements that have less to do with the truth than they have to do with you. Then start to believe that you’ve got the answers for people and the church, become angry when people don’t listen to you, strategize what you would do if you were in charge, and sow subtle seeds of discord among the people.

It won’t be long until you are convinced that God is on your side, and you won’t even see the damage that you are doing. You’ll be intoxicated with the mirror of ministry. You’ll be angry when people question you. You’ll find every reason in the world why everyone else is wrong. And what you don’t even realize is: you’ve lost your way.

It is no wonder that Paul warns Timothy about the problem of pride with new converts who move too quickly into leadership roles: *“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil”* (1 Tim. 3:6).

Every one of us ought to tremble at this thought because none of us is entirely immune. Be careful not to use the ministry for yourself.

2. Be sloppy with the Scriptures (vv 8-10)

The second thing that emerges in this text is the way in which these false teachers were using the Scriptures, specifically the Old Testament law. It seems that the false teaching which was plaguing the church at Ephesus had some connection to how the law was being used. Paul had seen this in other ministry locations. In Galatia, for instance, the church had been greatly affected by some who claimed that in order to be a Christian one had to remain under the law, especially the command regarding circumcision. Paul uses strong words to call the people back to Jesus in Galatians 3.

3 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. 2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1-4).

The situation in Ephesus seems to be a bit different but the point was the same. It appears that there were leaders in the church who were teaching parts of the law in a way that wasn't right or biblical. They were using the Bible as a means of integrating Greek philosophy and thought with Christianity. We don't know what they were doing exactly, but we do know what Paul thought of it.

Paul begins by praising and commending the law, but in the context of using it correctly. As in other places, Paul wants the readers to know that the law is helpful but it must be used for the right purpose – *"Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully..." (1 Tim. 1:8)*. In other words, the law is not bad in itself, but it can be used for the wrong purposes.

Secondly, he clearly identifies the usefulness of the law by highlighting the audience to whom the law was written. This gets to the purpose of the law in the first place – *"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..." (1 Tim. 1:9)*. In other words, the law's main audience is those who are apt to break it. Its goal is to highlight the boundary lines of life and how often we cross them. That is why he goes on to list a series of well-known sin issues: *"for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers..." (1 Tim. 1:9-10)*.

This is common sense. Why do we have speed limits? Do we have them for people who drive slowly and carefully or for people who drive too fast? The answer is obvious. Laws are written with law-breakers, not law-keepers, in mind.

Now when I say the "Law" what are we talking about? Often the "Law" is broken into three divisions: Moral (Ten Commandments), Civil (rules for Israelite life), and Ceremonial (requirements for worship). That division was created to help navigate these difficult waters, but it would have been a division unknown to people in the Old Testament since every part of the Law was equally important and valuable. In the New Testament we see that Jesus fulfills the Law, getting to the heart of matter or the law beneath the law (Matt. 5:17; 22:37-40). In so doing, he affirms and expands the Moral Law, and his once-for-all sacrifice radically changes the Civil and Ceremonial (Heb. 9-10). So, the law is not bad; unless you use it incorrectly. A sledge hammer is a good tool, but you don't use it to stir chili or swat flies.

Therefore, it is really important to know not only what the Old Testament Law says but why it was written. Two passages help us here: Galatians 3:23-29 and Romans 7:7-12.

23 Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. 24 So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into

Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal 3:23-29)

7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7:7-12).

Therefore, we can see that the Law is useful in two ways: 1) it restrains sin by defining it, and 2) it exposes sin, pointing people to Jesus. Martin Luther called the Law a mighty hammer designed to crush the self-righteousness of human beings.¹ This is the way that the Law is a school master to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). It exposes our sin, shows us how far off we truly are, and points us to Jesus. The Law is good but it is not good news. It is helpful when it is used for the purpose for which it was designed.

As you can see, the use of the Law is a complicated issue that needs to be looked at very carefully. The false teachers were likely using the intricate rules of the Law and Greek philosophy as “new law” or a “higher law.” 1 Timothy 4 indicates that there was an issue about which foods someone should eat and forbidding of marriage. These teachers were using the Law to validate their teachings.

I have personally dealt with this kind of issue. I’ve dealt with people who have used portions of the Bible to dogmatically declare that they had found “God’s best.” I encountered Old Testament nutrition plans, diet plans, clothing or fabric recommendations (including which colors!), birth control, water purification, dating or courtship methodologies and prohibitions on inter-racial dating. And the problem was that people cited specific Bible verses.

Here are two examples. I once heard a fairly well-known conference speaker teach that you shouldn’t drink milk when eating steak because Exodus 23:19 says, “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk.” And a church named itself Landmark Baptist Church citing Proverbs 22:28 – “Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set” (KJV) – as the justification for singing hymns and using the King James Version. Now I have no problem with the King James or hymns; I love them both. But I do have a problem when one uses a verse in Proverbs that is talking about property lines as the basis for over-spiritualizing personal preferences.

These examples would be laughable except for the fact that the sloppy use of the Scriptures is dangerous. I’ve seen churches blown apart. I’ve seen people act very sinfully. I’ve seen children reject Christianity wholesale because of the ridiculous discussions that do not produce real

¹ John R. W. Stott, The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996), 47

maturity and genuine righteousness. I've seen well-meaning men and women become intoxicated when they learn that people will listen to them if they cite chapter and verse on everything that they do. So they search and quote the Bible at first because it is authoritative but later because it gives them power.

The sloppy use of the Bible can really make a mess of the church. How you study the Bible and how you listen to the Scriptures is really important. Let me give you a few pastoral recommendations:

- When you listen and read those who teach the Bible, trust but verify. Don't become cynical or negative. But don't be naïve.
- Realize that Scripture is revealed progressively and it builds on itself over time. The Old Testament must be viewed through the lens of the New Testament.
- Every passage has only one meaning or intent. It may have many applications but only one meaning, and the meaning is based upon what it says, not what it says to you.
- Read the context for the meaning. Look around the text.
- Compare Scripture to Scripture. You must know the whole counsel of God.

There is one more pastoral recommendation, and it takes us into the final point: listen for a gospel focus.

3. Neglect the Gospel (vv 10-11)

The third way to make a mess in or to split a church is to neglect the gospel. It is remarkable and instructive that Paul returns to this point. However, we should not be surprised because the gospel is the center of Christianity and is the means of spiritual growth. In other words, the gospel – the good news that Jesus died for sinners – is not just how one is born again; the gospel is the basis of Christian living and church-life. The gospel is not just the message that people outside the church need to hear; it is the message that people inside the church need to live.

Paul ends the list of sinful things that are exposed by the law with this statement:

"...and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, 11 in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted" (1 Tim. 1:10-11).

In classic Paul form, he ends the list with a catch-all phrase to be sure that people will not use his list as a legalistic grid (c.f., Gal. 5:20). He is concerned about anything or any action that doesn't fit with sound, healthy, God-glorifying, righteousness-producing teaching. The word "sound" refers to that which is healthy and helpful. Since Paul's purpose in writing to Timothy was to help him lead the church, his obvious concern is teaching that leads to needless problems in the church. I say "needless" because I don't want you to get the impression that all problems are bad. The issue is whether or not the right issues are on the table.

Secondly, take note of the fact that the soundness of the teaching is directly related to its connection to the gospel. Therefore, the truth is helpful if it is tied to the gospel. Why is this the case? It is because the gospel is the message of the entire Bible. The gospel – God’s reconciliation of mankind to himself through Jesus – is the golden thread woven through the Old and New Testaments. The gospel is the irreducible minimum of the Bible of the Scriptures, and it is the basis of all positional and practical righteousness.

“For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:19-20).

I was reading Romans 1 in my time with the Lord this week, and I was struck by the phrase “from faith for faith” in verse 17.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:16-17).

Righteousness comes from faith for faith. In other words, the gospel is received by faith and lived out by faith. The gospel is not just about where you go when you die; it is about where you go and what you do and what you say and what you think as you live!

Any Christian assembly of people – large or small, young or old, married or single – can create a huge problem when the gospel is not at the fore-front of their thinking and their living.

Finally, when the gospel is neglected there is a perspective about God. Paul describes the gospel as “of the glory of the blessed God.” Some translations, including the first edition of ESV, render this a “glorious gospel.” It is hard phrase to translate, but it seems (as reflected in the recent editions of the ESV) that “of the glory” is a better rendering. Additionally, Paul says that this is something with which he has been entrusted. So the gospel is a gift from God and all about the glory of God. Therefore, a church or Bible Study or Small Group or you at a restaurant with a friend neglect the gospel at a great cost.

How the Gospel Protects a Church

A church can easily be split or fractured. Historically it has been way too common. You could do it! When ministry becomes about you, when you are sloppy with the Scriptures, and when you neglect the gospel, terrible things happen.

How do we prevent that from happening? We have to know and live in the gospel. How does the gospel protect a church? Here’s how:

1. **It humbles us.** The gospel message is that you cannot save yourself and that you need help. It tells you that you are a sinner, and you cannot solve your own heart problem. And the result is that boasting is absolutely excluded (Rom. 3:27).

2. **It centers us.** The gospel helps to be reminded about what is the most basic and enduring message of the church. It keeps us on target. In the midst of everything that the church does, the central reality of the gospel keeps us from running off into worthless discussions.
3. **It focuses us.** Knowing who you are in Christ defines your identity and your purpose on the earth. It shows you the beauty of what Jesus has done, and it lifts your heart to worship a God “who blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). The gospel helps to know who we are, and, more importantly, what is really valuable.
4. **It motivates us.** The gospel – all that God has done for us in Christ – is the motivation for righteous living, generous giving, dangerous missions, and contagious evangelism. In light of the mercy of God “present your bodies as living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1).

This is what the gospel does! This is what it does for you personally, and this is what it does for the entire church. The gospel prevents a church filled with messy people from becoming a mess. The gospel, rightly understood and lived, makes “church” a beautiful thing.

Here’s the church.

Here’s the steeple.

Look inside and see a gospel-people.

Now that’s a beautiful church!

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