

Sermon, Leith Valley, Sunday 18th April

1 Timothy 1 Paul Trebilco

Today, we're beginning a series on 1 Timothy and it falls to me to give you an introduction to the letter and to the first chapter.

Reading a letter from the NT is a bit like reading someone else's mail. In the first instance, the letters are not to us – but to the Romans, or the Corinthians, or in this case, to Timothy. Through the guidance of the Spirit in forming the New Testament these letters are God's Word to us. But they are also *real* letters, and belong in a certain time and place, and in particular situations as part of ongoing relationships between people. Reading NT letters is like reading someone else's mail! If we are to understand them then, we need to get some idea of what the situation is.

And so we need to do some detective work. What's going on in 1 Timothy, what is the letter about, why is it written, what are Paul's concerns as he writes?

As Paul writes, Timothy is in Ephesus. The *key issue* with 1 Timothy is what Paul clearly regards as a huge problem there. Note 1 Tim 1:3-4:

³ I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴ and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith.

So “certain people” are teaching “different doctrines” that are simply speculations. Paul regards them as false teachers.

Paul ends the chapter on the same topic – v18-20.

¹⁸ I am giving you these instructions, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies made earlier about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, ¹⁹ having faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith; ²⁰ among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have turned over to Satan, so that they may learn not to blaspheme.

A highly extreme form of discipline – excluding them from the community for a time ...

He raises this in the middle of the chapter too:

⁵ But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. ⁶ Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

You can see how serious this! These people have “suffered shipwreck in the faith” – they’ve completely gone aground! They are teaching “different doctrines”, but it is “meaningless talk”. Serious stuff!

So what are these people who are teaching “different doctrine” on about? Its somewhat complicated – we have to figure out the background and we don’t get the full story. We have to piece it together from what Paul says elsewhere in the letter. Note these passages.

1 Tim 4:1-3 ¹ Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ² through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. ³ They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

1 Tim 6:20 Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge;

2 Tim 2:18 [they] have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting the faith of some.

So Paul is opposing false teachers who claim some form of knowledge – which seems to involve claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. These false teachers are also into asceticism - denying the body.

ANDREW (*Still sitting, but in a loud voice*):

But I don’t think you’re giving us a fair hearing there Paul!

(*Stands up and walks a little forward*)

We have communion with Jesus and so when he was raised, so were we! We’ve arrived! Through baptism we live truly spiritual lives now! We’ve left behind all the old things of the body and so we have insight into all sorts of spiritual things! Jesus gives us this knowledge and understanding. Through our knowledge we really know God.

LYNNE (*Still sitting, but in a loud voice*):

Yes and you need to understand correctly what we say about marriage and food.

(*Stands up and walks a little forward*)

Didn’t Jesus say that in the future age there wont be any marriage! So since we’ve been completely saved by Jesus’ death, and share in his resurrected live now – since we’ve arrived - we don’t think there should be marriage any longer.

ANDREW:

And Jesus has given us the key to reading the Old Testament. We know what the law is all about, and Jesus has given us the true meaning of all those genealogies and stories. We know what the OT is all about.

LYNNE:

And we don't eat some foods because that way we can show that we are truly spiritual – and so freed from material stuff like food. Obviously we do eat some things – but symbolically we show our freedom by abstaining.

PAUL continues:

See this is the sort of thing we have happening all the time in Ephesus!

Andrew and Lynne return to their places.

So you see that there is a crisis in this church in Ephesus. There were a number of house churches which made up the whole community – and what's probably happening is that a number of the leaders of these house churches – a number of teachers (1 Tim 1:7) had gone off the rails – into what Paul calls this false teaching – they had shipwrecked their faith. And they had taken whole house churches with them (Tit 1:11: he tells Titus that the opponents “must be silenced since they are upsetting whole families”). Marshall suggests “The opposition is regarded as sizeable, is winning support and is dangerous. ... [Paul] is dealing with a powerful movement which has already made serious inroads into the life of the congregations.”

And so Paul writes to Timothy with advice about this crisis and how to deal with it. That's why he spends a lot of time in this letter talking about leadership and the qualifications for leadership. Some women are involved as leaders of the false teaching too – which is why Paul speaks about women in chapter 2 and about widows in 1 Tim 5 (esp 5:11-15; also 2 Tim 3:6). And he spends a lot of time combating the moral and social impact of the false teaching. The crisis requires serious action and dominates the whole letter.

Its like two leaders of our church — taking some of our small groups completely off the rails. A real crisis

Let me then give some reflections on this.

Firstly, note that the early church had its problems too - sometimes big problems! We tend to think that all was rosy in the New Testament, all was ideal, and if only we could get back to that situation! But it wasn't always rosy! They too faced big challenges, big contentions, and sometimes they went off the rails! We should be sympathetic – they had a great deal to work out about who Jesus really was – about what his resurrection meant, about how he had saved us. And they did not have a New Testament to guide them – most of it hadn't been completed, or at least it wasn't compiled as a book. It's a bit like trying to navigate your way around a large city without a map! You can get lost!

They were still trying to understand, to make sense of the huge impact of the Christ event!

If I had asked you – what was it like being a Christian, being a member of the church – in the first century, what would you have said? Great community, zealous love for one another? The power of the Spirit at work, changing lives? Yes all those things.

But not just sweetness and light. Also disagreement, argument, struggle, challenge, opposition. And these teachers who have gone off the rails are not outsiders – they were Christians who had “shipwrecked their faith” – the early church faced trouble from insiders –

other believers - as well as from outsiders.

So life in the early church was very challenging and sometimes plain hard work; just as we can find church hard or a real challenge – or just as we witness the all too human side of the church – so too did they.

But they too were human – it was God’s treasure in earthen vessels. They too made mistakes, found it hard. It has never been easy!! This side of the Lord’s return, and of heaven, church never *will* be easy. I find that immensely reassuring!

Perhaps the most important thing is that God doesn’t give up on the church! The fact that 1 Timothy was written shows this! In 2 Tim 2:25 Paul says of the false teachers: “God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth”. God doesn’t give up on the church – Hallelujah.

Secondly, the relationship between faith and what we might call “knowledge” or understanding is important. We are *saved* by faith – faith in Jesus. Anyone and everyone can be saved! We are not saved by our knowledge!

I work in the Dept of Theology and Religion and we offer a Bachelor of Theology degree. I’ve often thought what a marketing opportunity it would be if you could say “Come and do a BTheol at Otago – and get a head start on the entrance exam into heaven!” A degree of little earthly value but with huge heavenly rewards!! The crowds would flock! But no!!! We are saved by *faith* – not through a Bachelor of Theology degree! Praise the Lord for that!

Yet what we believe is not irrelevant. It is important to understand about Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and so on. Paul tells the Corinthians that they are “infants in Christ” (1 Cor 3:1) and he longs for them to become mature, so that he can speak to them of God’s wisdom (1 Cor 2:6). At least in part this is a reference to understanding.

And the false teachers were *saying* all sorts of wrong things, wrong doctrines – that led to shipwreck in their faith. Their understanding was all wrong! Because they had such a distorted view of what Jesus had done, about the resurrection, and about how to live the Christian life – because their understanding was all wrong, they could no longer have true “faith” in Jesus. The Jesus they believed in was simply wrong! They were believing this way – when Jesus was over here!

There is perhaps a down-playing of the importance of understanding the faith and of truth today. Don’t make it complicated!

An early Church writer Gregory said something of John’s Gospel that is true of all of Christianity: “*An infant can paddle in it...and an elephant can swim in it.*”

This is one of the wonders of Christian faith – all can encounter the wonders of Christ, yet even the most learned theologian can occupy themselves with the mystery and riches of God’s revelation. Here, an infant can paddle, and an elephant can swim.

But there is a down-playing of the importance of truth.

Student saying they were developing - “My own theology”. Would never say “My own physics”. Truth matters. Its not negotiable! Gravity exists whether I believe in it or not, whether I understand it or not!

So we need to walk something of a narrow road here. We are saved by faith – and faith alone. But what we believe does matter – for if we have a completely misguided view of who Jesus is, of God’s work in our lives – then our faith is misdirected.

We believe in a person – and if we have a totally misguided idea of who that person is we are misguided in the direction of our faith. So we need to keep *growing* in understanding.

But in the end we are saved by faith. Hallelujah for that!

Thirdly, in the face of the threat of false teaching, Paul affirms God’s grace. Having spoken of those who teach “different doctrine”, and before speaking of them making a “shipwreck in the faith” we read this:

1 Tim 1:12-17:

¹² I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, ¹³ even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is what the *true Gospel* is about – Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.

Paul presents himself as an example – not of outstanding knowledge or deep understanding, though he was these things. He is exemplary in his need of mercy, and in having received mercy. Jesus Christ displayed “the utmost patience” to me – for Paul persecuted the Church and he was a man of violence. He had acted “ignorantly in unbelief” – but God can solve the problem of wrong knowledge – of unbelief, or misunderstanding, and of wrong action – and can bring faith.

God saves – even those who are diametrically opposed to God! Even those who are stuck in ignorance and unbelief and false teaching!

Paul presents himself as the worst of sinners – who has been saved by Christ Jesus who came into the world to save sinners! All sinners and all sorts of sinners. Christ’s patience to Paul should prevent *anyone* from despairing of Christ’s mercy.

This is the Gospel of overwhelming, overflowing, superabundant grace: v14: “and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me.” The word translated “overflowing” means “to experience extraordinary abundance.” Its used of a glass that becomes *too full*. Paul experienced this sort of overflowing, overwhelming grace. Salvation is a gift – something given – not a reward for our thinking. It is important to think aright, but salvation is a gift of overflowing grace. “His grace is enough, his grace is enough ... for me”.

In fact note the wording of v14: “the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” As well as receiving grace, faith and love were also abundantly poured on Paul. The faith and love are “in Christ Jesus” and so their source is *not* Paul himself, but Jesus. Faith and love are not independent human qualities or attributes – but Christ’s gift. Faith and love are gifts of God’s gracious initiative of sending Christ - things created in us, called into being in us by Christ’s grace. These gifts transformed Paul the persecutor and blasphemer – and they can transform us! They transform ignorance and unbelief into faith, and violence and blaspheming into love.

This is the God we believe in – who saves in Jesus Christ. There is hope for the false teachers! For people who go off the rails! For them, the grace of our Lord Jesus overflows too!

For all of us, who slip into unbelief or lovelessness or sins of all sorts, the grace of our Lord Jesus overflows! There is hope for the youngest child, and for the profoundest thinkers of the world! There is hope for all. Even the foremost of sinners like Paul - who both thought and acted all wrong – can be saved. There is hope because of overwhelming grace!

And since this is our God – this should lead to praise and worship, that we might together bring glory to God; Notice how the section ends – “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.”