

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 4:1-5

By James J. Westendorf

1 Τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ῥητῶς λέγει ὅτι ἐν ὑστέροις καιροῖς ἀποστήσονται τινες τῆς πίστεως προσέχοντες πνεύμασιν πλάνοις καὶ διδασκαλίαις δαιμονίων 2 ἐν ὑποκρίσει ψευδολόγων, κεκαυστηριασμένων τὴν ἰδίαν συνείδησιν, 3 κωλύοντων γαμεῖν, ἀπέχεσθαι βρωμάτων, ἃ ὁ θεὸς ἔκτισεν εἰς μετάλημψιν μετὰ εὐχαριστίας τοῖς πιστοῖς καὶ ἐπεγνωκόσιν τὴν ἀλήθειαν. 4 ὅτι πᾶν κτίσμα θεοῦ καλὸν καὶ οὐδὲν ἀπόβλητον μετὰ εὐχαριστίας λαμβανόμενον 5 ἀγιάζεται γὰρ διὰ λόγου θεοῦ καὶ ἐντεύξεως.

TRANSLATION

1. *But the spirit very clearly says that in future times certain ones will fall away from the faith, (willingly) embracing deceiving spirits and the teachings of devils, in the hypocrisy of those who speak lies, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, (and commanding) to abstain from foods, which God created for reception with thanksgiving by the believers who know the truth. For the entire creation of God is good, and there is nothing to be rejected that is received with thanksgiving. For it is sanctified through the Word of God and prayer.*

INTRODUCTION

In chapter three of 1 Timothy the Apostle Paul has just outlined for his co-worker, Timothy, what the proper conduct ought to be for the leaders of the church. He describes both bishops and deacons as men married to only one woman, but not necessarily unmarried. They are to be Christians who are temperate, self-controlled, and not given to much wine; but not necessarily abstainers from certain foods and drink. Paul's outline of behavior for the pastors and teachers of Christ's church counsels moderation and sanctified common sense without swerving to either extreme, that of over-indulgence or that of asceticism. This is the kind of example that the believers in every congregation ought to be able to look up to in its leaders.

But the Apostle warns that the church will not always steer the middle course between these extremes as he so carefully has done. Dark days lie ahead for the church, times in which leaders will arrive who will purposely, not ignorantly, twist God's Word and mutilate the guidelines for a God-pleasing life. Confusion and a falling away from the faith will result. The leaders of the body of Christ will have to speak clearly to avoid a genuine disaster. To be forewarned is to be prepared.

VERSE 1

"But the Spirit clearly says" We cannot say with absolute certainty whether Paul is here referring to an earlier prophecy, the fulfillment of which is now looming on the horizon, or whether he is speaking of revelation which he himself has received. Earlier the Lord himself clearly stated that apostasy and false doctrine would be a sign of the last times, misleading many people. "At that time if anyone says to you 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect — if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time." (Mt 24: 23-25 All Scripture quotes taken from NIV) The signs that false doctrine was beginning to take root within the church evidently also were visible for Paul speaks of "the secret power of lawlessness already at work," (2 Th 2:7), and John says that "even now many antichrists have come" (Jn 2:18b). But I think that it is safe to say that the full scope of Paul's words looked to the future for its fulfillment. Paul himself by inspiration of the Holy Spirit prophesies and warns the church as he does elsewhere. (See also Ac 20:29 and 2 Th 2:1-12)

“In future times” This seems to be the preferable translation. The Greek could also be translated “in the last times” (comparative or superlative) but here it seems to refer to an event which lies just around the corner. Timothy himself, not just somebody way in the future, should be on his guard. Regardless of the translation we should remember that the signs of the last times apply to the entire New Testament age and should remind every generation, Timothy’s as well as our own, that the end is near.

“(willingly) embracing deceiving spirits and the teachings of devils” The idea behind the Greek participle is that of gladly pulling toward oneself, embracing eagerly. Those who fall from the faith go after their false doctrines with a zeal and practice and proclaim them with an eagerness that they never displayed for the truth. Paul describes the teachers they listen to as “deceiving” (the Greek gives us our word, planet, “wandering from a true course”) spirits.” It is not unheard of to call false teachers “spirits.” John does so also when he warns, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” (1 Jn 4:1) And he calls their doctrines, “the teachings of devils” because all false doctrines are lies, twisting and denying the truth of God’s Word. Of Satan Jesus says, “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (Jn 8:44b) In 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, Paul states that the coming of the great false teacher and deceiver, the Antichrist, is part of Satan’s work (verse 9) (See also Ephesians 6:11ff). The risen Lord also reveals to John that the deceiving beast of Revelation 13:11-18 served and was under the control of the dragon, Satan. We sometimes are quick to conclude that gross denials of the main doctrines of the Christian faith are devil-inspired; but are not so quick to realize that little lies deny the truth of God’s Word, the mark of Satan, as surely as the big ones do.

VERSE 2

“In the hypocrisy of those who speak lies” There is considerable difference of opinion as to the construction of this phrase or its place in Paul’s sentence. “Speakers of lies” is in the genitive case plural and could modify “devils;” however, it obviously refers to those who teach false doctrine, not the devils who inspire them. Its case does not allow it to modify the “deceiving spirits,” so perhaps the whole phrase is best referred back to the main verb of the sentence, “will fall away.” Those who fall away do so manifesting the hypocrisy of those telling lies. They are insincere, as all liars are. They are not interested in the truth, no matter how sincere or well intentioned they seem to be. They serve instead their own pride, reason, greed, or fear.

“Having their own conscience seared with a hot iron” Some commentators like the picture of branding in this Greek verb. The consciences of these false teachers are marked with Satan’s brand whose teachings they proclaim. But better seems to be the picture of cauterizing. Their consciences are burned into insensitivity, the way a cauterized nerve becomes senseless. They are the “senseless” of Romans 1:31. They have no feelings or pangs of conscience because of their denial of the truth or because of the havoc they are wreaking on the church at large and on the faith and lives of those who listen to them. Because of their seared consciences they also are capable of the greatest violence and can work untold harm on their followers.

VERSE 3

“Forbidding to marry, (and commanding) to abstain from foods” The construction Paul uses here is called a *zeugma* by the grammarians, defined as a first term which fits exactly (marry fits with forbid), and a second term which does not fit (forbid to abstain is not Paul’s meaning), and yet the sense is perfectly clear. Paul speaks the same way in 1 Corinthians 3:2. One of the prevailing characteristics of the doctrinal system of these false teachers would be their proclamation that asceticism, abstaining from earthly pleasures and relationships, is a superior, yes, even more holy way of living. Celibacy is morally superior to wedded life. Refusing to eat certain foods, such as meat, is more holy than eating everything. Work righteousness very

quickly becomes a part of the system too, Application to the Roman Catholic Church is obvious; but the doctrines here condemned describe many other systems of false doctrine as well.

“Which God created for reception with thanksgiving by the believers who know the truth” The entire relative clause refers to both the marriage and food which are wrongfully forbidden by the false teachers. God created these things, not to satisfy some urge on his part to create, but as gifts to be received and enjoyed by human beings. One commentator has correctly observed, “the question at stake is that of our whole concept of God. Are we to think of him as grudging us our earthly life, or are we to find in it a continual proof of his presence and goodness?” (Interpreter’s Bible) The believer guided by the truth of God’s word recognizes and acknowledges these earthly joys and relationships as coming from a gracious God who blesses as his wisdom and goodness dictate.

VERSE 4

“For the entire creation of God is good, and there is nothing to be rejected that is received with thanksgiving” Paul is simply repeating the judgment of God himself when at the end of the six days of creation he declared everything he had made and ordained to be good. It is this truth which the false teachers deny when they declare marriage and certain foods to be inferior, if not outright sinful.

These creations and ordinances of God are meant to be a blessing to his people. But there is a correct way to receive them. They are to be received with thanksgiving and gratitude. Part of that attitude will include using these blessings to the glory of the God who gave them (1 Co 6ff). Receiving these blessings without thanksgiving makes them become objects to satisfy human lust and greed. And a lack of what human judgment declares to be the right amount of these gifts or the right time in which they should be given leads to discontent and murmuring.

VERSE 5

“For it is sanctified through the Word of God and prayer” The entire creation is in itself morally neutral. It is neither good or bad. It is the way it is given and received that makes the difference. The “Word of God” speaks of the giving of God’s creation. The Lord states that he gave it to be a blessing to man. (See Ge 1:29-30, food and Ge 2:18ff, marriage) Verses from God’s Word such as Psalm 106:1 and Psalm 145:15-16 are even used upon the reception of these gifts to show the holy, gracious purpose behind God’s giving them. “Prayer” is man’s response to God. His prayers reflect the attitude in which he receives the gifts of the creation. Such prayers will express the faith, directed and shaped by God’s Word, which leads the believer to receive with thankfulness and to dedicate to God’s glory all that he has and uses in this life.

CONCLUSION

Paul warns against two opposing extremes:

- **EXTREME ASCETICISM** - The natural world and man’s physical body that is a part of that world is inherently evil. To enjoy material things is evil.
- **EXTREME NATURALISM** - Material is neither good nor bad so how we use it is a matter of indifference and cannot harm us.

PAUL’S VIEW is that the material world is neither good nor evil. “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.” (1 Co 8:8) But since it was created by God for his people, its reception and use are very important. Everything the Christian receives must be consecrated to the service of the God who gave it in a spirit of true thankfulness. This requires both self-denial and enjoyment of the natural world.

The Apostolic Constitutions of the Second Century summarize Paul's thought and apply it to the clergy. "If any bishop, elder, or deacon, or anyone of the clergy abstain from marriage, meat, wine, not through self-discipline, but through abhorrence of them as evil in themselves, forgetting that 'all things are very good' and that 'God made male and female' and then blasphemously repudiates creation, either let him amend or be deposed and cast out of the church; likewise for a layman also."