

Some Will Depart

Genesis 1:26-31, 1 Timothy 4:1-16 (ESV)

May 28, 2006

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith.” Thus this chapter begins with hard words: “Some will depart from the faith.” We will get to more comforting words in a moment, encouraging words, life giving and life sustaining words, but the chapter begins with these hard words, so we need to hear these first: “Some will depart from the faith.” How could that possibly be? How could anyone leave the faith? How could anyone cease to be Christian? What does this mean?

First of all, it means that there is a faith. For anyone to have departed from the Christian faith means, first of all, that there is a true Christian faith from which he or she departed. And for there to be a Christian faith from which he or she departed means also that there is a gospel of Jesus Christ which engendered that faith. And for there to be a gospel of Jesus Christ means that Jesus Christ lived and died and lives again for the forgiveness of our sin and for the promise of eternal life. And for Jesus Christ to have lived and to have died and to live again means that God his Father is “the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.” And for us to be able to know and to believe that God his Father is the living God means also that there is a Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts and minds and lives. So, even these hard words, “Some will depart from the faith,” imply immediately the full content of the Christian faith and imply also the goodness and power of God who alone is the author of faith. For this we are profoundly grateful.

Second, that some departed from the faith even then, in the very earliest days of the church, when there were some still alive who had seen and known Jesus during his earthly life—that some departed from the faith even then, and that the church still exists yet today, nearly 2,000 years later, as we gather together here to read these very words about their departure—taken together, all of this means that those who departed were not successful, that they did not destroy the church, that they did not defeat the church, and that they did not cause the church to cease to exist. The false teachers did their damage. They wandered astray themselves and, what is worse, they led others astray with them. That is why Paul was warning Timothy about them and instructing him about how to work against them. But it is important for us to realize that the false teachers did not subvert the faith of the Christian church. They did not end the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have not driven

Christ, or God his Father, or the Holy Spirit away from this good earth. For this we are grateful.

I mention this not only for historical purposes but also and especially for the encouragement that even today not only should we not be surprised if and when there are false teachers of the church leaving the Christian faith and disturbing the Christian church—we should not be surprised because we have seen it all before—but also we should believe and expect that they will fail in their efforts to subvert the faith and to destroy the church. They will fail! They will do their damage, and we should resist them and try to protect the church against them, but we should do all this knowing that they will fail. God will destroy his enemies, and God will uphold his church. Thanks be to God!

Third, that some departed from the faith raises the questions of how and why they departed from the faith. The two are related. They both have to do with lies and falsehoods. “Why” they departed from the faith has to do with their listening to lies “by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.” “How” they departed from the faith has to do with their telling lies in that they forbade marriage and required abstinence from foods “that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

They started out listening to lies, which meant that they put themselves in league with the Devil, the Prince of Lies, the great purveyor of untruths. His basic strategy is to lie. That is what he does, and he does it very well. Moreover, it is of the very nature of Satan to lie. It is of the nature of Satan to deceive. It is of the nature of Satan to present and to promote anything other than the truth. So of course he is opposed to the faith, of course he is opposed to the gospel, of course he is opposed to Jesus Christ, and of course he is opposed to God the Father of Jesus Christ. And all those who listen to the lies, all those who devote themselves to falsehood and deceit, and all those who study at the feet of demons necessarily lose all sense of judgment and necessarily leave the Christian faith, which is a faith of truth.

What particular lies did these particular false teachers tell in Ephesus? In direct contradiction to the word of God, they said that marriage was forbidden to Christians and that some foods were forbidden to Christians. It was as if they thought that they could be more holy by being more strict than the word of God required, without even realizing that the arrogance involved in such presumption is itself the opposite of all holiness. Oh, the audacity of those who think they know better than God! And is it not interesting how audacity and mendacity so often run together? We have read today from Genesis 1, the very first chapter of the Bible, that God created man and woman to be together, gave them the food of the earth, and declared his whole creation “very good.” But these false teachers said that

creation was not good, that food was not to be eaten, and especially that man and woman were not to be together. That was a direct and explicit rejection of the very word of God. That is to say, these were big, blatant, flagrant lies. These did not deal with minute or obscure points of human behavior. These cut to the very core of human life, family, and community. And these lies are not even self-sustaining. You would think that if a group of people did not eat and did not procreate, neither they nor their teachings would be around very long. But the devil must keep finding new recruits. And such liars keep attacking the church.

I regret that these lies continue to be so familiar to us even today. Perhaps we are not plagued by those who say we need to be more strict than the word of God requires, but we are beset by those who say we should be less strict, which is simply a mirror image way of trying to set aside the word of God. The effect is the same. If there are not people today encouraging us toward fasting, there are those encouraging us to gluttony and profligacy, which can be just as destructive. If there are not people encouraging us toward an over strictness, there are those encouraging us to believe instead that anything goes, which has never been a good way to try to live a Christian life. Moral laxity is not a virtue. And what is perhaps most pernicious, as we need to be aware, there is a group of teachers even in the larger church today, liars one and all, by definition in league with the Devil, though perhaps not consciously so—it is more likely that they are grossly deceived—there are teachers and leaders in the larger church today who say that marriage is not simply for a man and a woman, but that “marriage” should also be entered into by a man and a man or enjoyed by a woman and a woman, and that the church should perform such “marriages” right in its sanctuaries and even that the church should ordain to the ministry people bound together in such same sex “marriages” as a way of condoning and celebrating their lifestyles. Do you not see that all of this is in direct contradiction to the Scriptures, and therefore rejection of the word of God, all the way from Genesis to the very end?

Paul warned us about such teachings and such teachers! We should know better than that! Why do we tolerate this? Why do we allow such people to continue to speak? When we hear these lies in the larger church today, we need to realize that the perpetrators of such lies have departed from the faith. We may be saddened by that, and we may be distressed by that, but we should never be surprised by it, and we certainly should not be overwhelmed by it. Instead, we should first realize, and then we should publicly declare, that such false teachers have departed from the Christian faith and that they have departed from the church of Jesus Christ. It has happened before. Paul told us about it precisely so that we would recognize it and take such appropriate action when it happened again.

What then are we to do? What are we to do in the face of such false teachers? Paul told Timothy and the church at Ephesus what needed to be done, and it still applies to us today. If the problem is that liars depart from the word of God, then the solution is that people of the truth should immerse themselves in the word of God. Now is the time that we need to hear those life giving and life sustaining words which I mentioned earlier. “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness....Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching....Practice these things, devote yourself to them....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.” In short, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” That is the way to life and salvation.

What Paul writes to Timothy he expects the church to overhear. And the purpose of these three ministerial activities is the building up of the church of Jesus Christ. First, we are to devote ourselves to the public reading of Scripture. We do that every Sunday morning here, usually reading one selection from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. We do this as an act of obedience. We do this as an act of submission. We do this as an act of prayer. We do this as an act of receiving sustenance, of receiving food, of receiving life, of receiving breath. Of course, we supplement this with the private reading of Scripture in our homes. Our private reading helps us to hear, to understand, and to appreciate what we hear in our public reading. But our private reading could never replace our public reading. We are the community of the people of God. We are called into existence by the reading of this word, we are sustained in our existence by the reading of this word, and we are sent out in mission to the world by the reading of this word. There is nothing magic about it. But there is something very powerful about it. Thanks be to God! By the careful, systematic, faithful, week in and week out, book by book, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse reading of the word of God, such as we do here, God opens us to his saving truth and immunizes us against the lies of the enemy.

Second, we are to devote ourselves to exhortation, that is to say, to the preaching of Scripture as the gospel of God. We cannot do without the public reading of the word, but it is not enough only to read the word. We are also to preach the word. We are to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to proclaim the good news. We are to shout it from the rooftops: Christ is risen! We are, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not only to read the Scripture as written, but also to hear and to proclaim what God is saying to us yet today. I have preached here at Grace Covenant more than 400 times now. You have heard me proclaim again and again that God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, that Jesus

Christ, the Son of God, came and lived among us as one of us, that he sacrificed himself on the cross for the forgiveness of our sin, that God raised him from the dead as the promise to us of eternal life, and that God calls us to faith and obedience individually and as the church. This is the gospel. This is the good news we proclaim. This is the good news by which alone we live. Thanks be to God!

Third, we are to devote ourselves to teaching, to the teaching of the Scripture as the word of God. In addition to the reading of the word, in addition to the preaching of the word, we also study and teach the word. We use dictionaries, we use grammars, we use concordances, we use atlases, we use ancient literature, we use the history of Christian thought, we use creeds and confessions, we use every means available to us to study, learn, and teach the word of God. We do such teaching during this service, we do it during Sunday school, we do it during circle meetings, and we do it in countless other settings. We cannot overdo it. This is who we are. We are a people who study and teach the Scripture as the word of God. We do this because God says for us to do this. We do this because God told Paul to tell Timothy to do this. We do this because it is by the word of God alone that we live. Here we stand; we can do no other.

Hence, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” These three form the heart of the ministry of the word. These are three means of grace by which God gathers and sustains the church. It is by these three that we can fulfill the other exhortations which Paul gives to Timothy: “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness.... Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.... Practice these things, devote yourself to them.... 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.”

That is to say, it is only on the basis of these three practices—reading, preaching, and teaching the word of God—that we will be able to realize even in these later times that some have departed from the faith “by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.” It is only on the basis of these three practices that we will be able to avoid and to resist “the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” It is only on the basis of these three practices that we will be able to know that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

Paul’s advice to his young associate, Timothy, all those years ago in Ephesus, continues to give good encouragement to all of us today as we seek to be the good and obedient church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ now in the early years of

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the twenty-first century here in Richmond, Virginia: “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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