

# Times of Difficulty

Exodus 7:1-13, 2 Timothy 3:1-17 (ESV)

July 2, 2006

“Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty....All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Here is the perennial situation of the church: “In the last days there will come times of difficulty.” Here is the only answer: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” The first verse of this chapter acknowledges the hard reality of our lives together. The last verses of this chapter acknowledge the stronger reality of the saving word of God. We would do well today to continue to acknowledge both and to learn how to move from one to the other. “There will come times of difficulty....All Scripture is breathed out by God.”

We must admit that Paul delivers a remarkable catalog of the ills of the church. “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” It is hardly necessary to comment on each of these. But it is noteworthy that several of them have to do with misdirected love:<sup>1</sup> “lovers of self, lovers of money...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”

The great truth underlying these distortions these misdirected loves, is that God created us to love him. If any lesser being did that, it would be inappropriate. But God actually deserves our love. We were created to love God. That is who we are. That is what we are about. And it is the great joy and privilege of the church to have been called and gathered together for the express purpose of having our love redirected toward God, its only proper goal. That is why Jesus Christ poured out the love of God upon us, so that we might again learn to love God. That is why we

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 75.

come and sing God's praises, exulting in his love for us, trying both to cultivate and to express our love for him.

The sad reality of the church is that we do not always live up to this calling. Sometimes even we slip back into old ways, into inappropriate ways, into misdirected love: "lovers of self, lovers of money...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." To love self rather than God is the original sin into which all of humanity has fallen. To love money rather than God is the root of all evil.<sup>2</sup> To love pleasure rather than God is to be distracted by the good things of creation as if they were the Creator.<sup>3</sup> But to love God is what we were created to do and what we have been saved to do. It is our highest joy and our greatest good. So how can we find our way home to our true love?

Paul offers several directives and assurances. First of all, in regard to those creating the times of difficulty in the church, Paul writes, "Avoid such people." The reason for that is obvious. As he teaches us elsewhere, "Bad company ruins good morals."<sup>4</sup> The first step toward avoiding and reducing difficulty in the church is to stay away from the people stirring it up. Strangely enough, people like that seem to be magnetic, gathering other people around them. But if we can be strong enough to avoid them, their influence will be reduced and negated.

Paul then writes, by way of assurance, "They will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all." This is remarkable. Sometimes we give evil more credit than it is due. It certainly appears to be powerful. It can be frightening. It can be destructive. But evil is negative and parasitic. It cannot thrive forever. In fact, it has already been defeated on the cross. Its power has been undone. Its "doom is sure."<sup>5</sup> So, "they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all."

But the even greater reasons not to be overcome by the difficulties in the church are the positive ones. "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me." "You," Timothy, "have followed my teaching." There are nine things Paul names here. I do not mean to neglect the other eight by naming only the first. I mean only that his conduct, his faith, his love, and all the rest can be included in his teaching. Of course, his "teaching" refers first

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<sup>2</sup>1 Timothy 6:10.

<sup>3</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*.

<sup>4</sup>1 Corinthians 15:33.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," stanza 3.

of all to his teaching of the content of the Christian faith, to the gospel, to the truth, to the doctrine which was so important for Timothy to impart to others. But Paul's teaching included also all of this faith, life, and witness, what he did and how he dealt with what was done to him. Paul affirms that Timothy has already followed this, and so he encourages him to continue to do so. "As for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings." It is with this original teaching of the faith that difficulties in the church are well met.

At this point, we have reached the foundation. "From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Paul's apostleship was not based on his popularity. Timothy's ministry was not based on good feelings. Christian faith, Christian ministry, and Christian life are based on the rock solid objectivity of the sacred writings, the Holy Scripture, the revealed and recorded word of God, the Bible. It is through the word of God that we receive grace. It is through the word of God that we receive faith. It is through the word of God that we receive salvation. This is the answer to all difficulties in the church.

To be as clear as possible about this, Paul makes an additional affirmation: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." When Paul was dead and gone, Timothy would still have the Scripture to which to turn. When Timothy was dead and gone, the ministers who came after him would still have the Scripture to which to turn. And yet today, after two-thousand years of ministers dead and gone we still have the Scripture to which to turn. They have not yet failed the church. They will not fail us now.

Three-hundred-sixty years ago, the authors of the "Westminster Confession of Faith" continued to appreciate the importance of the Scripture in terms they had learned from Paul, and they had this to say about them:

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to

commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.<sup>6</sup>

Now as we come up to our own day, think together with me about the nature and reality of the Christian church in terms of what we have learned from this passage about the word of God. Exactly who and what are we? First, the church is the body of Jesus Christ. This does not mean in any way that we are an extension of the incarnation of the Son of God. That would be dangerous thinking. But it does mean that the church is a living organism, given its identity by Jesus Christ. And it does mean that the church is not defined by buildings, pastors, officers, committees, bureaucracies, budgets, ethnicities, nationalities, or anything else besides Jesus Christ. Our identity as the body of Christ stands over against every other claim made upon us.

The significance of this is that, second, as the body of Jesus Christ, the church lives by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the word of God, recorded in the Scripture. Where there is no preaching of the gospel, there is no church. Where the gospel is preached and creates a hearing for itself, there the church exists. Thus, the church does not live by liturgy, program, emotion, self-will, or its own strength or fellowship, but only by the preaching of the gospel. Nor does the church depend upon the preacher of the gospel, but upon the gospel that is preached. This means that the single most important thing the church can do, and the highest duty of its officers, is to provide for the faithful, energetic, passionate, and winsome preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, every Sunday.

Third, as the body of Jesus Christ living by the preaching of the gospel, the church is a fellowship of people bound together by a shared faith in, and obedience to, God as made known in Jesus Christ. Actually, it is the Holy Spirit who does the binding together, and the shared faith is a sign of the binding together, not the cause. This means that we are a people of prayer, night and day, with and for each other and for all who are in need. It also means that we are a people of constant study, ever seeking to learn more of the Bible and of the historic Christian faith. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

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<sup>6</sup>*The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004), "The Westminster Confession of Faith," 6.001, p. 121.

Fourth, as the body of Jesus Christ living by the preaching of the gospel, a fellowship bound together by a shared faith in God, the church is ever committed to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, bringing them into the church as the body of Jesus Christ, and thus enlarging the fellowship. This may have been Presbyterians' weakest point during the last half-century. We cannot afford for it to be so any longer. As a body, the church fellowship is either growing or dying. It is a part of who we are as the body of Christ that we constantly strive to bring other people into the body.

Fifth, as the body of Jesus Christ living by the preaching of the gospel, a fellowship bound together by a shared faith in God and ever seeking to grow, the church is an agent of mission and compassion. Good works do not make us the Christian church. Good works flow from our already being the Christian church. Of course, we must not let "the good become the enemy of the best."<sup>7</sup> That is, while we want to do all good works, we must not let them take away our prior focus upon, and proclamation of, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the Son of God. But given that center, we strive to live obediently. This is who and what we are as the church of Jesus Christ.

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

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<sup>7</sup>To borrow a phrase from David Wright, Professor of Church History at the University of Edinburgh.