Believers must be nourished on God’s Word so they will know the truth.

False teachings about the gospel are at times subtle and not so easy to recognize. They contain enough passion and half-truths mixed in so that the errors sound believable. Sometimes, though, false teachings are so blatantly false that no believer should have difficulty spotting them.

Years ago on a long-distance trip, I was motoring along the highway and listening to the radio as I drove. This was back in the days before satellite radio and digital dials, so as one station faded out I turned the knob until another station came in clearly. During one stretch of the journey, I began listening to a radio preacher delivering his message of the day. He spent the first ten minutes of the program cajoling listeners to send sacrificial donations to his ministry. Taken aback by the speaker’s brazen fundraising effort, I nevertheless kept listening, assuming that he would soon get to his message from God’s Word.

Sadly, the speaker’s main message disappointed as well. Most of it was only loosely connected to the Bible. When the speaker did occasionally quote a Bible text, his interpretation and application of the text were questionable. Yet, it was a blatant claim the speaker made near the end of his message that disturbed me most. He raised an issue that equally devoted Christians have debated for a long time and then gave his conclusion on the matter without any biblical support. To support his view, he simply declared, “Do you know how I know that God agrees with me? Because I am made in the image of God, and it is what I want!”

Paul had once warned the believers of Ephesus that false teachers would come into their congregation like wolves sneaking into a flock of sheep (see Acts 20:29). That had occurred just as Paul predicted. Now Paul had sent Timothy to Ephesus to help the believers recognize and deal with those false teachers. The congregation’s future as a church was at stake.
Paul returned to his primary reason for writing—confronting false teachers in the Ephesian church. In chapter two, Paul addressed various aspects of proper Christian behavior. In the first thirteen verses of chapter three, Paul outlined the necessary character qualities of effective church leaders.

Paul’s ministry plans may have included his returning to Ephesus in the near future, perhaps to deal directly with the problem of false teachers. In the meantime, however, Paul wanted Timothy to remind the church “how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household” (3:15). The behavior and teachings of the false teachers were particularly troublesome for the church. False teachings about the gospel must have no place among God’s people. The Ephesian believers needed to be able to recognize false teaching and to correct it.

The antidote for false teaching was the “mystery of godliness” (3:16). God’s truth and godliness were necessary for the church in Ephesus to maintain their spiritual vitality. Paul illustrated this godliness with a brief hymn of praise that summarized Jesus’ ministry and the church’s proclamation of the gospel.

In chapter four, Paul exposed the demonic nature of the doctrine that was being promoted by the false teachers (4:1-6). Paul encouraged Timothy to draw strength from “the words of the faith and the good teaching” that Timothy had followed (4:6) and so to train himself in godliness (4:7). Timothy needed to take advantage of every resource available to him, including the spiritual gift God had given him (4:14-15). Fulfilling the gospel mandate required commitment and practice; thus, Timothy needed to pay close attention to both his conduct and his teaching (4:16).
Paul once again directed his attention to the false teaching he mentioned previously in the letter (see 1:3-7). The instruction Paul was about to share concerning false teachers in Ephesus came directly from the Holy Spirit (the Spirit explicitly says). Paul did not indicate the means by which the Spirit revealed the warning—whether by Scripture or a prophetic revelation; nevertheless, the content of the Spirit’s message was clear.

The phrase in later times (“in the latter times,” KJV) occurs only here in the New Testament, although similar phrases appear in other passages. For example, Paul used the phrase “in the last days” in 2 Timothy 3:1 (compare Heb. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:20). The phrase refers to the period between Jesus’ ascension and His second coming, also referred to as the church age. The apostle John described this period as a time of spiritual conflict with the enemies of Christ (1 John 2:18), a struggle that is just as relevant for today’s believers as it was for Christians in the first-century.

The Holy Spirit revealed to Paul that the church age would inevitably see some believers depart from the faith. In this context, the faith does not refer to a believer’s salvation or relationship with God. Rather, it refers to the foundational doctrinal truths of the gospel—sound gospel teaching. The Greek term rendered depart means “to distance, or separate, oneself from someone or something.” The false teachers in Ephesus had moved away from sound gospel teaching to false doctrines, and their influence in the church was leading other believers to distance themselves from the truth as well.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Apostasy” on pages 87–88 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the difference between an honest questioning of Christian doctrines and departing from the faith? What in your view is the best preventative for apostasy?

Rather than focusing on “love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5), the false teachers and their followers were paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons. The phrase deceitful spirits may refer to the evil spirits Paul described in Ephesians 2:2: “the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient.” However, Paul described the false teachers themselves as “deceiving and being deceived” in 2 Timothy 3:13. The phrase teachings of demons makes clear the true nature of these teachers. The battle in which the church was engaged was not a physical battle but one that engaged “the cosmic powers of … darkness” (Eph. 6:12). Some believers might be tempted...
to view false teaching as harmless; Paul did not agree. He contended that any doctrine that distorted or opposed sound gospel teaching was demonic.

The demonic teaching was being carried out through the hypocrisy of liars. The claims that the false teachers made about the gospel were lies. The false teachers did not even understand their errors (1 Tim. 1:7). The demands they made (4:3) were just for show.

The Greek word translated seared occurs only here in the New Testament and presents the picture of branding something with a red-hot iron. Paul may have meant that the false teachers were no longer capable of making proper moral decisions. Another possible understanding is that Paul was saying the false teachers’ attitudes and conduct showed the clear markings of the devil. They confessed to belong to Christ; their actions showed otherwise.

VERSE 3

They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods that God created to be received with gratitude by those who believe and know the truth.

Previously, Paul had pointed out the false teachers’ fascination with myths and genealogies (1:4). Here he pointed out two more aspects of the false teaching: prohibiting marriage and demanding abstinence from eating certain foods. The idea behind such ascetic practices was extreme self-denial meant to gain a higher moral or spiritual state by one’s own effort. Paul condemned a similar practice among the churches in Colossae (Col. 2:16-23).

Although Paul had touted the advantages of the single life for gospel ministry in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35, he never forbade marriage. Indeed, he encouraged Christian spouses in Corinth not to abstain from sexual relations except temporarily for the purpose of extended prayer (7:3-5). Paul’s previous instructions in 1 Timothy 3:2,12 that church leaders should be the “husbands of one wife” was an implicit approval of marriage. Later in 1 Timothy, Paul urged young widows to marry again and raise families (5:14). Unlike the false teachers, Paul viewed marriage as a God-given relationship to be enjoyed and honored.

The false teachers also demanded abstinence from foods that God created. Paul had raised the issue of abstaining from certain types of food when writing to the church in Rome. The issue for Paul was not the inherent superiority of one diet over another (see Rom. 14:2-4) but rather the commitment to show respect for a weak believer’s faith (14:13-21). God’s purpose in creating edible foods was to provide for the needs of His human creatures. Neither eating nor abstaining from eating in itself draws people closer to God (see 1 Cor. 8:8-9).
VERSE 4

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

Paul linked his instruction that all food should be received from God with thanksgiving to the creation account in Genesis 1. Following God’s own evaluation of His creation in Genesis 1:31, Paul declared that everything created by God is good. Jesus made a similar assertion concerning food to His disciples in Mark 7:18-19. Further, God reinforced the conclusion to Simon Peter in Acts 10:9-16 as a way of showing that the gospel was for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Paul reinforced the stipulation that God’s gifts (which included foods) were not to be rejected by His people but rather received with thanksgiving. Some Bible students point to this verse in support of the practice of offering a prayer of thanksgiving before meals. Jesus often took the time to express such prayers of thanksgiving (see Mark 6:41; 8:6).

On the other hand, we should not misinterpret Paul’s instruction to validate gluttony or the consumption of harmful or intoxicating substances simply because God created them. Paul’s argument was against false teachers who demanded ill-advised dietary restrictions for improper reasons.

VERSE 5

since it is sanctified by the word of God and by prayer.

The word rendered sanctified literally means “set apart, made holy.” It can have the sense of something’s being made right and being approved by God. The pronoun it points to the phrase “everything created by God” in the preceding verse. Paul thus was referring to the means by which God’s gifts such as marriage and food are to be gratefully received and enjoyed.

First, such gifts are made holy by the word of God. Interpreters have proposed several possibilities concerning what this phrase means. One suggestion is that Paul was referring to Old Testament Scriptures (some psalms, for example) that could be used as blessings to express gratitude to God. A second suggestion is that the word of God refers to God’s declaration that the things He created are good. They are sanctified because He deemed them to be so. A third possible understanding is that Paul was referring to the gospel, which freed believers from the ritual demands in the law. Thus, what God had declared clean and approved in Christ, His people should never refuse or treat as unclean (see Acts 10:15).

Each of these three understandings has merit. In my judgment, however, the third option seems to best fit the context in 1 Timothy 4. The false teachers claimed to base their teaching on God’s law (1 Tim. 1:6-7), but Paul
argued that their teaching was deceitful and demonic (4:1). Their demands that believers abstain from marriage and certain foods turned God’s gracious gifts into an unnecessary legalistic burden. Believers should receive and enjoy God’s gifts with prayer and thanksgiving as God intended.

**BE DISCIPLINED** *(1 Tim. 4:6-10)*

**VERSE 6**

*If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and the good teaching that you have followed.*

Paul’s solution for the false teachings threatening the church was for Timothy to **point these things out to the brothers and sisters**. The phrase *these things* could refer either to what Paul had just written in 4:1-5 or more broadly to Paul’s instructions in the letter as a whole. While the second option is possible, Paul likely intended to emphasize the instructions related to marriage and food. The Greek word translated *point ... out* literally means “to lay something down.” Timothy’s responsibilities as a minister of the gospel did not permit him to ignore false teaching from any source. He must be courageous in confronting false teachers no matter their names or influence in the church. The spiritual health of the entire congregation (**the brothers and sisters**) was at risk, and Timothy stood accountable to Paul and also, more importantly, to the Lord.

Fulfilling the task Paul set before him meant that Timothy would be a **good servant of Christ Jesus**. Interestingly, the Greek term rendered *servant* in this verse is the same word that refers to the office of deacon in 3:8,12-13. Paul was not indicating, however, that Timothy held the office of deacon in the Ephesian church. Rather, Paul meant that Timothy’s high calling was to serve Christ in whatever local congregation he might be assigned.

Paul next reminded Timothy that he was well-equipped to fulfill his assignment in Ephesus. For one thing, Timothy had been **nourished by the words of the faith** since childhood (see 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15). The Greek word rendered *nourished* emphasizes the manner in which a child is brought up or trained in life skills. Timothy’s early training had majored on *the words of the faith*, probably a reference to the gospel. Second, Timothy was well-equipped to serve Christ in Ephesus because he had received (and followed) **good teaching**. The phrase *good teaching* no doubt included his learning the Old Testament Scriptures as a youngster. It probably referred also to the hands-on instruction concerning the gospel that Paul had given Timothy during their missionary journeys. Timothy had deep reserves from which he could draw spiritual nourishment as he confronted the false teachers in Ephesus.
VERSE 7

But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness.

Having dealt with the positive role Timothy was to play in nurturing the believers and himself, Paul again warned Timothy to reject the doctrines being touted by the false teachers. As he had done in 1 Timothy 1:4, Paul again identified one example of the false teachings as pointless and silly myths. These myths likely were fantastical tales built around certain Old Testament heroes. Because the heroes were “biblical,” the stories had a certain appeal for believers. However, the stories were filled with fictional content that, in Paul’s words, was pointless (“profane,” KJV; “irreverent,” ESV; “godless,” NIV) and silly (“old wives’ tales,” NIV). The Greek term rendered silly was often used in ancient philosophical debate to describe an argument undeserving of serious consideration.

Paul reminded Timothy that a devoted servant of Christ gained nothing good from majoring in fictional hero stories. Instead, a Christian leader’s main discipline should focus on training oneself in godliness. The Greek word translated train was used in Paul’s day to describe an individual’s daily, rigorous exercise regimen in preparation for athletic competition. It is the basis of the English word gymnasium. Paul encouraged Timothy to be similarly focused on spiritual disciplines that resulted in godly beliefs and conduct.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Godliness” on page 654 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What spiritual disciplines do you focus on to train yourself in godliness? What are some activities that can distract believers today from staying disciplined in Christlike living?

VERSE 8

For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

Paul did not think physical exercise was void of any value. He mentioned it for comparison purposes to emphasize the eternally greater value of spiritual disciplines. Physical exercise has a limited benefit (“profiteth little,” KJV; “of some value,” ESV; NIV), while godliness is beneficial in every way (“has value for all things,” NIV). With the phrase rendered training of the body,
Paul may have been referring either to the Greek emphasis on disciplined athletic training or to the false teachers’ strenuous demands of asceticism based on Old Testament law. Either way, Paul’s main point is clear: spiritually training oneself to live a godly life is of utmost importance for the believer.

Paul pointed out that the superior value of godliness over physical training lay in its enduring benefits. Godliness equips the believer not only to live a full and meaningful life in Christ during the present age but also to look forward confidently to the indescribable blessings of heaven in the life to come. Paul made a similar statement in Titus 1:2, where he wrote about “the hope of eternal life that God, who cannot lie, promised before time began.”

VERSE 9
This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance.

As in 1 Timothy 1:15 and 3:1, Paul underscored the validity of a saying, assuring Timothy that the instruction was trustworthy. In this instance, he added that the instruction deserved full acceptance. The question for Bible students in each instance is whether Paul’s validating statement points backward or forward. In both 1:15 and 3:1, the statement of validation likely points forward—that is, to the verse immediately following the statement. In 4:9, however, the statement of validation most likely refers back to what Paul said in 4:8 about the superior benefits of godliness.

VERSE 10
For this reason we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Paul further asserted that the eternal value of godliness was the reason (“therefore,” KJV; “to this end,” ESV; “that is why,” NIV) that he and Timothy—indeed all believers—labor and strive in gospel ministry. The two words translated labor and strive appear frequently throughout Paul’s writings. The term rendered labor literally means “to expend energy in a task.” The word translated strive could describe action in an athletic contest or in fighting or struggling in general. Paul used the term twice in referring to the effort to live by faith (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7).

Paul did not mean that Christians labor and strive to earn their salvation. We are “saved by grace through faith ... not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). In growing as believers, however, and in serving Christ effectively in the world as His church, we benefit ourselves and others in eternal ways by laboring and striving to increase in godliness. The rewards of such training are far beyond any amount of energy we have to expend!
Paul then expanded on his reason for working so diligently at his missionary work: **we have put our hope in the living God.** The phrase *living God* contrasts with idols, which are neither alive nor divine. Putting one's hope in the living God means to turn from the idolatry practiced by pagans as well as from the self-righteous efforts of works-salvation that dominated first-century Judaism.

Paul’s description of God as **the Savior of all people** echoes the apostle’s previous statements about God’s desire for “everyone to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4) and about Jesus’ gift of Himself “as a ransom for all” (2:6). Paul was sure that God had all people—Jews and Gentiles—in mind when He provided the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Paul also knew that not everyone receives the salvation God provided. The phrase rendered **especially of those who believe** affirms that while God is the **Savior** regardless of how sinners might respond to Him, only **those who believe** in Jesus Christ actually benefit from the salvation He provided.

**BE AN EXAMPLE** (1 Tim. 4:11-13)

**VERSE 11**

**Command and teach these things.**

Paul turned his attention to the specific task that lay before Timothy. The Greek word translated **command** appears five times in 1 Timothy. It was used to describe various people in authority and could mean “to order, command, or instruct.” Paul used this word in explaining his reason for leaving Timothy in Ephesus (1:3). Coupled with the word translated **teach**, Timothy’s task was evident: he was to communicate clearly and authoritatively the sound gospel teaching he had learned from Paul. The phrase **these things** may refer especially to what Paul had written in 4:6-10. However, the phrase could also refer to everything addressed in the epistle thus far.

**VERSE 12**

**Don’t let anyone despise your youth, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.**

Evidently, Timothy’s young age was an issue for some believers in Ephesus, perhaps even for Timothy himself. We can do no better than to speculate about Timothy’s age, since the Greek word rendered **youth** could describe anyone from preteen years to the age of forty. Clearly, however, Paul would not have raised the issue of Timothy’s age without cause. It seems reasonable to assume that Timothy was significantly younger than many of the adult believers in the Ephesian church and younger, in particular, than the false teachers.
Paul’s recommendation was for Timothy to set an example for the believers. The apostle identified five areas in which Timothy could and should excel, areas in which the false teachers had been shown to be lacking. Timothy’s speech was to be free from the pointless arguing and debating so prized by the false teachers. The word conduct referred to Timothy’s way of life; it was to be guided by Christian principles. Love was the goal of Paul’s instruction to Timothy (1:5); God’s plan, in contrast to the empty speculations of the false teachers, operated by faith (1:4). Purity was to characterize Timothy’s behavior, especially as it concerned younger women (5:2). Timothy’s exemplary lifestyle would garner the respect that a faithful minister of the gospel should receive from believers in Ephesus.

VERSE 13

Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching.

Paul then urged Timothy to give his attention to the priority tasks of a gospel preacher: public reading of the Scriptures, exhortation, and teaching. The Greek term rendered give ... attention to can also mean “turn your mind to.” Unlike the false teachers, who obsessively paid attention to myths and genealogies (1:4), Timothy needed to maintain a singular focus on the Scriptures—reading them aloud in worship gatherings, exhorting worshipers to heed them, and instructing worshipers as to their meaning and application.

Paul was not describing a complete model for public worship in Ephesus. The worshiping congregation would also engage in praying, singing, and observing the Lord’s Supper. The activities that Paul commanded in 4:13 are the parts of public worship in which Timothy must correct the errors of the false teachers.

Paul had previously warned Timothy to beware of anything that was “contrary to the sound teaching” (1:10). Timothy’s public reading of Scripture and his exhortation and teaching from Scripture, along with his exemplary lifestyle, should encourage believers to reject the pointless teachings that were being advocated by the false teachers.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In what ways do you see church leaders setting an example for believers in the five areas Paul mentioned in 4:12? In what areas do you need to improve the example you are setting? What will you do to get started?