

03. 1 Timothy 1:3-11



1 Timothy 1:3

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

It is seven or so years since Paul gave his farewell address to the elders of Ephesus (see Acts 20:15-38), and Paul is concerned that a group of Jewish Christians have been disrupting the faith of the Christians in the area by ‘teaching a different doctrine’ (ἑτεροδιδασκαλέω, whence ‘heterodox’). As he will go on to explain, he is referring to teaching that is against ‘sound teaching’ (1:10), which is to say that it is not in conformity with ‘the gospel’ (1:11). In ‘urging’ (παρακαλέω) Timothy to remain in Ephesus and to use his authority to control those who are teaching error, Paul is conveying to Timothy the call (καλέω) of the risen Jesus.

1 Timothy 1:4

and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine providence that is known by faith.

In the Jewish tradition, God's word as found in their sacred writings was a living word through which a living God continued to speak to his people. The interpreters of the Torah expressed their attempts to explore this ongoing revelation in developing the narrative sections of the sacred writings in what they called the haggadah. They sought to apply the legal sections through what they called the halakah. Paul was trained in this practice. However, not all attempts to interpret and apply the scriptures were valid, as can be seen by reading some of the inter-testamental writings that have come down to us. Paul refers to the more fantastic stories as 'myths', using this term in the narrow sense which it had taken on among the philosophers of his day: stories that do not convey truth.

We are reminded of Jesus' own critique when he quotes Isaiah 29:13: 'in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines', and adds: 'You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition' (Mark 7:7-8). Paul has already referred to this in his Letter to the Colossians where he writes: 'All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings' (Colossians 2:22). Paul's objection is simple and direct: all these stories '**promote speculations rather than the divine providence that is known by faith**'. For Paul this means that they contradict what God has revealed in the mystery of Jesus' self-giving love as demonstrated on the cross.

promote speculations rather than the divine providence that is known by faith.

The focus of teaching in the Christian community should be on what Paul calls here the providence (οἰκονομία) of God. Instead of indulging in the kinds of distraction and fanciful embellishments on the Bible narratives that we find, for example, in many of the Jewish writings of the period, and instead of attempting to work out who is saved and who is not saved by trying to establish one's links with Israel and the families to whom God made his promises ('genealogies'), people should be focusing on what God has revealed through Jesus about 'God's providence (οἰκονομία) of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things' (Ephesians 3:9); 'the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in the Messiah as a providence (οἰκονομία) for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him' (Ephesians 1:9-10).

This alone is what matters, and it is something that can be grasped only ‘**by faith**’, not by endless speculations based on manipulation and fanciful embellishments of biblical texts. What it means to know something by faith is explained by Paul in the following verses in which he offers a rich definition of the true goal of Christian teaching.

1 Timothy 1:5

The aim of such instruction is love (ἀγάπη) that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God’s self-giving, a ‘word’ of love. When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God’s instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God’s love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection.

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In Jesus' self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God's gift of self, to God's love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes elsewhere: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

The Risen Jesus pours love into our hearts, and it is love that defines our relationship with each other. It may come as a surprise to discover how seldom Paul uses the word 'love' to express our relationship to God – in fact only three times:

1. 'As it is written: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who **love** him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).
2. 'Anyone who **loves** God is known by him' (1 Corinthians 8:3).
3. 'We know that all things work together for good for those who **love** God' (Romans 8:28).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of our loving Christ only once, in the final sentence of his Letter to the Ephesians: 'Grace be with all who have an undying **love** for our Lord Jesus the Messiah' (Ephesians 6:24).

When speaking of our response to Jesus and to God Paul prefers to speak of 'faith'.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God's love flowing through us to others. Paul sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and thanks to this gift from us to each other. Jesus' disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where Jew and Gentile share in the same Spirit.

In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves; to love with his love. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus' own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship. It is not the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well. It is not a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals.

As Paul writes: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: 'Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2).

When Paul says that ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6), he is quoting traditional Jewish wisdom. Judaism does not separate faith from obedience; it does not think of faith as an intellectual assent that leaves one’s behaviour untouched. To believe means to commit oneself to do God’s will ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Jesus affirms the same truth: ‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21).

James writes: 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (James 1:22).

'Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead' (James 2:17).

James is speaking about 'works of faith', not 'works of the law'. He is insisting, like Paul, that real faith bears fruit in love. Of course it matters what we do. Of course we must obey the will of God.

1 Timothy 1:5-6

The aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk

Instruction that does not lead to ‘love’ is ‘meaningless talk’. Paul can write in this way because of his own experience of being loved by Jesus. Thirty years of missionary endeavour have only deepened his conviction that ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6). Paul never tires of advising us to ‘live in love, as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’ (Ephesians 5:2).

Verse five is a brief but rich statement of the garden of the soul in which love can flower.

As for Jesus, so for Paul, love is a matter of the ‘heart’. Its roots find nourishment only from the very centre of our being. True love can flow only to the extent that our heart is pure, for true love is the essence of the very being of God. Indeed, ‘blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God’ (Matthew 5:8). True love – the love which is the goal of Jesus-centred instruction – is experienced only in the communion with God which is poured into our hearts by the Spirit of the risen Jesus (Romans 5:5). For it is a communion in the love that binds Jesus to the Father. It is true love that we are all seeking, and we will find it only to the extent that we find God, or rather that we allow ourselves to be found by God: ‘you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul’ (Deuteronomy 4:29). We pray: ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me’ (Psalm 51:10).

The emphasis on truth causes Paul to add ‘good conscience’, for the heart can be distracted, deceived and corrupted by error. Good teaching is essential if we are to learn to discern between impulses that are superficial, distracting and distorting, and impulses that truly come from our deepest centre where we are in touch with the divine Spirit. Hence the importance of faith that is ‘sincere’ (ἀνυποκρίτος). Faith can be ‘hypocritical’. It can be worn like a mask. Genuine faith flows from contemplation of the love of God revealed in the heart of Jesus in his self-giving on the cross. Genuine faith purifies the heart, clarifies the judgment and bears fruit in love. All else is ‘meaningless’. The false teachers fancy themselves as being teachers of God’s revelation and God’s will as expressed in the scriptures, but in deviating from love and from the life of true faith, they show that they ‘know neither the scriptures nor the power of God’ (Matthew 22:29).

1 Timothy 1:7

desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

Those who are responsible for ‘teaching a different doctrine’ (1:3) claim to be ‘teachers of the law’ (1:7). Elsewhere, Paul has presented Jesus and his revelation of the truth about God as the goal to which the law was directed. To take one’s eyes off Jesus, to deviate from love, and to waste energy in speculations that go nowhere is to demonstrate precisely what Paul is claiming: that they do not understand ‘either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions’ (1:7).

1 Timothy 1:8

We know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately.

‘The law is good’ (see Romans 7:12,16). It is an expression, however partial and imperfect, of God’s self-revelation. Paul, the Jew, has the greatest respect for it. It shows us in what way our behaviour is contrary to God’s will. But, unlike ‘the law of the Spirit of life in the Messiah Jesus’ (Romans 8:2), it does not of itself liberate us from sin’s dominion; it does not enable us to live in accordance with God’s will. However, it does point us towards the one who can liberate us, Jesus.

Furthermore, the law still has a role to play in pointing out sin. We are not meant, however, to distract ourselves by focusing on the details of the law that have been transcended by the full self-revelation of God in Jesus. For those engaged in sin, such as Paul goes on to describe, the law can help. For the ‘righteous’ (δικαίος), for those who are doing God’s will by living a life of love ‘**from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith**’ (1:5), teaching should focus on contemplation of Jesus, and not focus on the law as though it had not reached its goal in him.

1 Timothy 1:9

This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the righteous but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane

The first three commandments of the Ten Commandments refer to our behaviour in relation to God. Paul begins in the same way. Deuteronomy 5:1-7 tells us to listen to the God who liberated Israel from Egypt and to have no gods other than him; Paul speaks of those who are ‘lawless’ (ἄνομος) and ‘insubordinate’ (ἀνυποτάκτος, ‘rejecting their right place in the divine order’). Deuteronomy 5:8-11 tells us not to worship images of God or to use his name in vain; Paul speaks of the ‘godless’ (ἄσεβής) and ‘sinful’ (ἁμαρτωλός). Deuteronomy 5:12-15 tells us to observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy; Paul speaks of the ‘unholy’ (ἄνόσιος, ‘those who have no respect for the sacred’), and the ‘profane’ (βέβηλος).

1 Timothy 1:9-10

The law is for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders

The second section of the Ten Commandments speaks of sins we commit against each other. Sin against the fourth commandment, ‘Honour your father and your mother’ (Deuteronomy 5:16), is expressed here by Paul in its extreme negative form as ‘those who kill their father or mother’, or perhaps metaphorically, those who smite their parents by total disregard for their authority. ‘Murderers (ἀνδροφόνος) picks up the fifth commandment.

Paul then refers to the sixth commandment, by listing those who indulge in irresponsible heterosexual (πόρνος) and homosexual (ἀρσενοκοίτης) behaviour. In condemning slave traders (ἀνδραποδιστής) Paul may well be referring to those who take slave boys into brothels for purposes of prostitution.

To what is Paul referring when he speaks of ‘sodomites (ἀνδραποδιστής)?

1. Greek Culture

The culture in the Greek and Roman worlds was, speaking generally, indulgent towards male sexual behaviour. The male was considered (by male writers and teachers) to be superior, not only intellectually, but also from the point of view of physical beauty.

An adult male was encouraged to have a young male to give him pleasure, including the pleasure of sexual gratification. It was expected that the intimacy be intellectually stimulating, and that the older male would look to the education of the younger male, and behave towards him in a sensitive way. Most moralists extolled the virtues of love directed to boys (pederasty)

Moralists condemned those who ran brothels, and those males who made a living out of offering their sexual services to older males. In port cities like Ephesus and Corinth the presence of coiffured and perfumed young men in the streets and public squares was a common sight and moralists of divergent philosophical persuasions spoke out against what they decried as decadent behaviour, but pederasty was widely encouraged.

The following judgment is typical: 'To be in love with those who are beautiful and chaste is the experience of a kind-hearted and generous soul; but to hire for money and to indulge in licentiousness is the act of a man who is wanton and ill-bred' (Aeschines, *Timarchus*, 137).

One can readily see the dangers inherent in what was judged to be acceptable forms of pederasty: dangers in the unequal nature of the relationship, in its impermanency, and in the occasion it provides for abuse and humiliation. However, the point being made here is that the culture saw its advantages as outweighing its disadvantages. There is a good deal of evidence in the ancient texts of a prevailing misogyny, but there is no evidence of the kind of homophobia that we witness today.

2. The Hebrew Scriptures on male sexual behaviour

There is the terrible story of Sodom (Genesis 19) which describes a mob seeking to rape two male strangers to whom Lot has given hospitality. Rather than betray hospitality Lot offers to hand over to them his two virgin daughters. The story is a condemnation of rape, both homosexual and heterosexual, and betrayal of the law of hospitality. The story demonstrates an assumption of male superiority and a disgusting denigration of women, but it is not about homosexuality verses heterosexuality.

The same issues are highlighted in the even worse story of the Levite (Judges 19). A mob wanted to have sex with the Levite. Instead they were offered his concubine whom they raped till she died.

The only passages that refer to homosexual behaviour are found in the Book of Leviticus:

‘You shall not lie with a male (ἄρσενος κοίτην) as with a woman; it is an abomination’ (Leviticus 18:22). ‘If a man lies with a male (ἄρσενος κοίτην) as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them’ (Leviticus 20:13).

The word ‘abomination’ occurs 116 times in the Hebrew Bible and covers a range of behaviours (see for example Proverbs 6:16-19). Since no context is given for the condemnation expressed in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, we must ask what behaviour are the authors calling an ‘abomination’? We do not know what they were saying unless we know what the nature of the behaviour was which they were setting out to condemn.

Were they condemning the kind of public, flagrant, male prostitution that they observed in the Greek world? Were they concerned at the waste of male semen and so of what they understood to be the vehicle of life (they had no concept of the role of the female gamete)?

What emerges in the discussions of these texts among the Rabbis and in the writings of Jews living in the Greek world is a strong disgust for the male prostitution that is also condemned by Greek and Roman moralists. They also condemned pederasty, which Jewish writers condemn as typically Gentile.

There is no discussion at all of homosexuality as a physiological-psychological sexual preference or tendency. The focus is on homosexual behaviour. It is not evident that the condemnations in Leviticus envisage a situation in which two male adults as equals express their affection sexually and with mutual sensitivity.

3. The Christian Scriptures and homosexual behaviour

When we turn to the Christian Scriptures we find that Jesus has a lot to say about love, about patience, about respect and forgiveness – values that are basic to any committed love. There is no record of Jesus ever addressing the subject of homosexuality.

Paul touches on the topic in three places. In two of these he includes homosexual behaviour in lists, but without comment. Again we need to ask what behaviour he was condemning.

1 Corinthians 6:9

Among those who will not inherit the kingdom Paul lists ‘μαλακοὶ’ and ‘ἀρσενοκοῖται’.

According to the most obvious reading of the text Paul is repeating what is commonly said by Jewish writers and to a lesser extent also by Stoic and other Greek and Roman moralists of his day. He is speaking against the behaviour of those young men, quite obvious in cities like Corinth, who dressed themselves up and offered themselves for money for the sexual gratification of other males. He is also condemning those who take advantage of them. Since Paul simply lists these sins here we should assume that he is repeating common Jewish condemnation of male prostitution and pederasty. We would need more evidence to justify extending Paul's meaning to condemn outright all expressions of homosexual attraction.

1 Timothy 1:10

The same must be said about his statement here in his First Letter to Timothy. Among those who behave in ways that are ‘against sound teaching’ he includes ‘fornicators (πόρνος), sodomites (ἀρσενοκοίτης) and slave traders’ (ἀνδραποδιστής). The first group are the πόρνοι, the primary meaning of which is ‘male prostitutes’. This may well be its meaning here. If so it may include those whom Paul calls μαλακοὶ in 1 Corinthians.

The second group are, once again, the ἀρσενοκοίται, which, as in his list in 1 Corinthians, could be referring to those who take advantage of the prostitutes. The third group are the ἀνδραποδισταῖς. Paul may well be referring to those who take slave boys into brothels for purposes of prostitution.

Romans 1:25-27

In the only other text in which Paul refers to homosexual behaviour he goes beyond a simple listing of sins: 'Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator ... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.'

This text is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it is one of only a handful of texts from the time that even mention female homosexual behaviour. Secondly, Paul uses the expression 'unnatural' (παρὰ φύσιν), used by a number of Greek moralists in their condemnation of male homosexual gratification that was separated from real affection and where the younger man was treated as a commodity for sale.

Given that Paul was writing to Christians who were living in a Greco-Roman milieu it is reasonable to conclude that he is condemning the exploitative, corrupting or injurious homosexual relations that he witnessed, as in other places he condemns such behaviour among heterosexuals. He includes women to demonstrate the universal degradation from which human beings need redemption. It is likely that he intends to include the Gentile practice of pederasty. Beyond that, we are in the area of conjecture.

To propose that he was speaking against adult consensual intimacy between male or female homosexuals in a committed relationship is to extrapolate well beyond the context of the times. Paul may never have envisaged the possibility of such sensitive intimacy.

If Paul did think of all homosexual relations as 'unnatural', this could have been because he assumed that all people are 'by nature' heterosexual?

We should note that everything Paul says about love, sensitivity, mutuality, and the sacred nature of sex, is relevant to the discussion of sexual behaviour. What we cannot do is take these few texts from Paul and use them to close the discussion on homosexual behaviour, as some are wont to do. The Bible has a lot to offer us, but we must discover the most loving way forward, faced with questions which are, in the light of advances in psychology, quite new.

If we want to act in a Christian way we need to keep our eyes on Jesus, who revealed in everything he was and said and did that God is love. In every scene in the Gospels we see him loving people. He rejoiced in their goodness and when people were behaving badly he knew to embrace them in love, knowing that only love can offer us the space to change when change is needed; only love can attract us to find our deepest self and grow in the unique expression of love that each person must find.

Though homosexuality is not mentioned in the Gospels, it is surely obvious that our sexual identity is at the heart of who we are. Jesus pleaded that we love others as we love ourselves. If we are heterosexual surely we should rejoice in the amazing gift to us and to society of people who are homosexual.

If we are homosexual we should rejoice at the amazing gift to us and to society of people who are heterosexual. Our hearts should be filled with gratitude as we rejoice in our differences. As regards our sexual identity it will take us all our life to learn to express our identity in ways that are only beautiful, and we will need everyone's help on this journey. People who are homosexual need special sensitivity because they are in the minority and they have suffered a long history of ignorance and conscious or unconscious prejudice. If we believe that God is love, and if we watch the way Jesus respected and loved everyone why do we not love each other across our differences? Should not Christians be the first to embrace our own sexual identity, and join people who identify as heterosexual or homosexual in joyfully celebrating their committed love.

1 Timothy 1:10-11

Paul concludes his list of those for whom the law is intended with liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

The law points to such behaviour and condemns it in God's name. So does 'sound teaching that conforms to the gospel'. The law has reached its goal in the gospel. Paul's point is that Timothy is to insist that those teaching in the Christian community focus on sound, wholesome, teaching which is based on what God has revealed in Jesus and is proclaimed in the gospel entrusted to Paul. As he wrote to the Romans: 'love is the fulfilling of the law' (Romans 13:10).

Paul describes the gospel as ‘the gospel of the glory of the blessed God’. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ‘It is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah’ (2Corinthians 4:6).

The gospel is about Jesus ‘in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell’ (Colossians 1:19). Jesus is the radiant splendour of God’s being, manifesting God’s love, and calling forth praise and thanksgiving (‘**blessing**’) from all creatures, for the provident love of our ‘**blessed**’ (μακάριος) God’. This gospel has been entrusted to Paul. Paul has authorised Timothy to be the leader of the community in Ephesus. Timothy is to insist that those teaching in the community conform their teaching to the gospel proclaimed by Paul.