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Biblical Theology Exegesis of 1 Timothy 4:1-5

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1 Timothy 4:1-5

Introduction

What a church believes will directly shape how that community behaves in its city. So its theology and beliefs have to be constantly critiqued and formed by the Scriptures and the good news about Jesus. 1 Timothy is an important letter because it helps us gain a holistic vision of the nature and mission of the church. How the church is perceived in public is also important to Paul. Christians should be known as people who are full of integrity, for good works, for serving the poor and vulnerable out of devotion to the risen king, Jesus.

Paul writes this epistle to his partner in ministry, Timothy in Ephesus. He writes this letter to follow up with Timothy and explain how to confront false teachers and restore the stability of the early church in Ephesus (Towner *NDBT* 331). Paul warns about these false teachers in the preceding chapters of the epistle (1 Ti 1:3-6 *English Standard Version*). The false teachers such as Hymenaeus and Alexander were dividing the church and generating controversy (1 Ti 1:20). Their teachings weren't resulting in love and genuine faith and, therefore, weren't faithful to the mission of Jesus. Paul contradicts the false teachers in saying that the purpose of the Torah isn't to fuel speculation, but expose the truth about the human condition as it did for Paul. Scripture is meant to reveal the grace of Christ who came to save sinful, broken people (1 Ti 1:12-17). Following the introductory exhortation and setting of the epistle, Paul gives specific instructions to help correct the problems caused by these leaders who had bad theology. This

passage implies the biblical topics of prophecy, apostasy, eschatology, inconsistency of Old Testament laws, creation, and Jesus' role in creation, all of which will be discussed in this paper.

1 Timothy 4:1

Now, with that context in mind, in chapter 4, Paul addresses the problem of these false teachers in Ephesus. Timothy had to deal with leaders who were spreading incorrect teaching and the effects of these leaders on the people of God. Paul says that, according to the Spirit, in later times, some will depart from the faith (1 Ti 4:1a). He warns the church to be careful to stay true to the Christian beliefs, because of the impending apostasy prophesied by the Spirit. He writes, "the Spirit expressly says" which denotes divine foreknowledge, or prophecy of things still to come. The "Spirit" refers to the Spirit of Truth or the Spirit of God which could be referring to the revelation of God through Jesus' messages, or through prophets in the OT Scriptures. In order to see what Paul has in mind when he writes about the Spirit, it's integral to note the characteristics of what the Spirit is saying.

The impending departure from the faith is characterized by giving heed to corrupt teaching by deceitful spirits (1 Ti 4:1b). By paying attention to the teachings of demons, people will depart from the faith. Paul here presents a logical argument by contrasting the truth of the faith and the falsity of deceitful teachings. The truth of the gospel is taught by the Spirit of God while the deceitful, corrupt teachings are taught by demonic spirits. He presents the former teachings as trustworthy and the latter as damaging. Unfortunately, people will succumb to these false teachings by devoting themselves to them in later times.

Apostasy Eschatology

When one is discerning the later times which Paul is referring to, one must first take into account the important prerequisites of the OT and the Gospels. Paul had a foundational

knowledge of the OT and the life and teachings of Jesus so it's essential to take that background knowledge into account when conducting an accurate biblical-theology (MaGee 161). The theme of departing from the faith has a root in the broader context of Scripture. According to this verse, apostasy is a sign of the last times, and the presence of the heresy in the church is an indication that the last times are underway (Towner *CNTUOT* 898). Another Scripture that backs this connection up is Isaiah 19:14. Concerning a future reality, Isaiah prophesies that there will be a "spirit of confusion". This perverting spirit will cause people to stumble. If one looks to the Gospels, Jesus also mentions apostasy in the final days. When describing signs of the end of the age, Jesus recounts that many will fall away and betray one another and false prophets will lead them astray (Mat 24:10-11; Mar 13:22). He also warns that some will fall away when tribulation or persecution arises (Mar 4:17). He warns that after he leaves, there will be people who spring up to draw people away from the faith (Mark 13:5-8; Act 20:29-31). With the broader theological context in mind which Paul was familiar with, it aids in the understanding of his specific warning against the false teachers.

1 Timothy 4:2

Paul describes further these false teachings in the subsequent verse. They are influenced through the insincerity of liars (1 Ti 4:2). Paul makes it crystal clear that what these people are saying is corrupt. They are not only liars, but their consciences are seared and they teach out of insincerity. Paul's constant language of deceitfulness depicts the severity of these teacher's corruption. The fact that their consciences are "seared" appeals to the idea that their corruption is absolute and nothing coming from their mouths will be truthful.

To expand on the point of seared consciences, understand that Paul uses the term "conscience" on other occasions in this letter (1:5, 1:19, 3:9) in a positive light. In these

instances, Paul encourages people to maintain a good, pure, clear, and/or upright conscience. In each case, Paul couples a good conscience with sincere faith. A good conscience and faith go hand-in-hand. With those previous examples in mind, a new light is shed on Paul's accusation of "seared" consciences. This is the only reference in the letter of consciences being burned up. It is a grave depiction of the depravity resulting from a lack of faith. Since faith and good conscience are closely linked, a seared conscience fits with Paul's description of these people who have fallen away from the faith (1 Ti 4:1). Paul puts this depravity another way earlier by saying those who reject faith and good conscience "have made shipwreck of their faith" (1 Ti 1:19). These grave matters of falling away from the faith are not to be thought of lightly.

Seared Consciences and Hard Hearts

The false teachers have chosen disobedience to God. They are either passively or actively holding to deceiving spirits. The language of being "seared" points to God's intentional (or permissive) letting go of those who are choosing disobedience. This motif is reminiscent of God's hardening Pharaoh's heart (Exo 4:21, 7:3) and letting foolish people's hearts become darkened (Rom 8:21). Both are unsettling depictions of people choosing to disobey God that act as warnings to the reader to guard one's heart against falling away.

1 Timothy 4:3

Now that Paul has set the stage for the depraved, faithless nature of these teachers, he continues by noting what they were saying. They were forbidding marriage and requiring abstinence from certain foods (1 Ti 4:3a) which was likely because of the ritualistic food laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Paul takes issue with their misguided restrictions because they are in contention with Scripture. He points to Genesis 1:25, 29, 31; and 9:3 which describes how all that God created is good, including marriage and food.

He concludes they have interpreted Genesis incorrectly and, rather, that all that God has created should be received with gratefulness by those who know Him (1 Ti 4:3b). Note the language “those who believe and know the truth”. Here, Paul is contrasting this group of people from those that turn away from the faith. This group knows the truth so they are not persuaded by false teachers. Rather, their faith will remain strong. His point also suggests that with the right spiritual mindset, God’s people can enjoy God’s creational gifts without reservation. It is more than just the fact that they can recognize false teaching, they can actually interact with God’s creation properly as a result. They, knowing the “truth”, can enjoy the fruits of creation, including all sorts of good foods, and the good gift of marriage.

The word “truth” is *aletheia* in Greek, and in this context, it means the truth of the gospel of Christ. It is the correct doctrine, or orthodoxy, that the false teachers were straying away from in Ephesus (1 Ti 1:6). The truth is the body of beliefs of which the church is the guardian (Woodbridge 828). In this epistle, truth is revealed by the Spirit and it is to be believed and known by the body of Christ. Not only are believers to know the truth, but they are commended to receive God’s good creations with thanksgiving. There’s a connection between knowing God’s truth and receiving God’s gifts with thanksgiving inherent in the syntax of this verse. It shows that those who know the truth of the Gospel, that Jesus fulfilled the law, are grateful for the blessings that they know are promised by God. Their knowledge of the truth causes them to be thankful for what the truth means for their lives.

Those who believe and know the truth experience the fullness of creation and give thanks because of it. This group, the people of God, are to be marked by their belief in the gospel. What sets them apart is their knowledge of the grace of Jesus Christ. It is integral to their identity, so

Paul recognizes the importance of guarding their hearts and making sure they know how to identify some false teachings.

OT Laws

This passage can be better understood with a broader knowledge of the context of food laws and the controversy surrounding them. These false teachers are believed to have been forbidding meat based on contextual clues and Paul's reference to Genesis 9:3 which sets a theological precedent for eating meat. In Gen 9:4; Lev 17:10-14; and Deu 12:16, certain foods, specifically eating meat containing blood, are outlawed for the people of Israel to stay ritually pure. However, Jesus' death on the cross fulfilled the law (Mat 5:17), and no longer were certain foods considered defiling. Christ declared all foods created by God as clean in Mark 7:18-19 and Acts 10:9-16 recounts Peter's vision when the Lord tells him that God has made all foods that were previously marked ritually impure as clean. With these texts in mind, the false teachers were outrightly mistaken in their interpretation of the relevance of ceremonial food laws. They seem to have an improper Christology, as they do not recognize him as having freed humanity from the necessity of avoiding certain foods. He was the ultimate sacrifice who enacted a liberated communion with God, but the false teachers fail to see that.

1 Timothy 4:4

Paul is directly contradicting the teachings that they were spreading around the streets of Ephesus. Since he is challenging the false teachers in an attempt to persuade people not to listen to them, it is imperative to make a solid argument. It can be a difficult endeavor to go against leaders in an area so he rightly backs up his statement with sound reasoning so as to win the argument. Here in verse four, Paul gives the reason to his previous assertion that the people of God ought to enjoy the fruits of creation such as marriage and all kinds of food with

thanksgiving. It is evident that this is a statement of reasoning to Paul's argument because this verse begins with the word "for" or "*hoti*". Following the word "for", Paul states that everything created by God is good. From what authority does Paul make this claim?

Creation

Well, it is an obvious reference to God's assessment of creation in Genesis 1:31 which says, "and God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good". Since God sees all that He made as good, His divine authority is what Paul appeals to in his argument.

He negates the false teachers' mistaken limitations on the basis that God gave everything for food by implicitly referring to the creation account in Genesis. God says, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything [for food]" (Gen 9:3). Paul appeals to God's lack of limitation for his people which the deceivers have misunderstood. God has ordained every plant yielding seed on the face of the earth for people to have for food. God saw it all as very good for humanity to eat. Adam was given dominion over the land and the freedom to eat its foods and the false teachers have no right to claim otherwise.

Thanksgiving

Following the truth that everything created by God is good, Paul also contends that nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. The language of reception of God's good gifts with thanksgiving or *eucharistia* is repeated for the second time, therefore, it is an important part of the passage and should not be overlooked. Note the important "if", and its function in Paul's reasoning. To put Paul's statement in other words, there are two key parts. First, nothing that God created should be rejected. Second, nothing is to be rejected *if* it is received with thanksgiving. In other words, if anything that God has made is received with

thanksgiving, it is not rejected. Keep in mind this unique qualifier, however, because it is significant that Paul did not stop at “nothing is to be rejected”. Rather, Paul emphasizes the point that everyone should express gratitude to God when receiving his good gifts.

1 Timothy 4:5

Similarly to verse 4, verse 5 begins with “for” but this time, it is the Greek word “*gar*” which introduces another reason for the claims that Paul is making. This, “for” indicates another important qualifier to support his claim. He says “it is made holy, by the word of God and prayer” (1 Ti 4:5). The object that “*it*” refers to is God’s good works of creation. Paul could have in mind a broad scope of God’s creation because he says “everything created by God is good” but it could also be more narrowly referring to the rite of marriage and foods that the false teachers were restricting.

Paul declares these things as good because they are made holy by the word of God and prayer, but how do prayer and the word of God make creation’s good gifts holy? Well, the word of God makes creation’s gifts holy because it declares them as good. The “word of God” can refer to His literal speaking which deemed his creation as good (Gen 1:29), or the Scriptures that recount the times when food is declared as good to eat. Either way, Paul has a creation theology in mind and both the Old Testament and God’s actual words are 2 sides of the same coin. Both are compelling sources to declare the foods holy.

Not only the word of God, but prayer makes God’s gifts holy. This is closely tied with the previous verses which reference thanksgiving. If what God has gifted men is received with prayer and thanksgiving, it is made holy and good. Earlier in his letter, Paul links together “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings” (1 Ti 2:1) when he encourages the audience to pray, so it is evident that that prayer and thanksgiving are inextricably intertwined in

Paul's theology. When he tells the church that prayer makes God's gifts holy, he has thanksgiving at the reception of God's gifts in mind.

Jesus as the Word

With a border biblical-theological lens in mind, the word of God that makes creation holy could be viewed as Jesus. The word of God could also be referring to the life and ministry of Jesus. In the New Testament, the "word" often refers to the life and ministry of Jesus as the focus of God's speaking becomes the word of God through the person of Jesus rather than just referring to Scripture (Fanning 850). So, Jesus, as the word, makes God's good gifts holy. Jesus is even referred to in a few places as 'the word of God' (Joh 1:1, 14; Rev 19:13). John indicates that Jesus existed before creation with language that mimics Gen 1:1. John describes how all things were made through him (Joh 1:3), which indicates that he was an agent of God's created work, not merely a part of the creation (Fanning 852). He is "not only involved in the original creative acts but also intimately associated with God's continuing providential care for creation" (Osborn 433). His role includes continued care of the created order. Col 1:16-17 puts it concisely by saying, "by him, all things were created... all things were created through him and for him". So it is clear that Jesus is at the center of creation theology and as the word of God, he makes creation holy

Jesus is at the center of Pauline theology in general and it is underpinning this passage. The reason that the teachers in Ephesus were incorrect is that their teachings didn't align with Jesus' life and message of love (1 Ti 1:5). For example, God's creation is to be received with thanksgiving Jesus gave thanks when he broke bread in Matthew 15:36. Jesus provided the example of how one should live and Paul saw that these false teachers were not following Jesus' example. Jesus' life is a model for all areas of any Christian's life. Since he is the image of God

restored incarnate, it is each Christian's obligation to follow in his footsteps (Osborn 433). His faith was strong, he prayed often, and he enjoyed communion with the Father by appreciating the Father's gifts.

Application

This passage is relevant to Christians today on two distinct levels. First, it warns against false teachers who seek to cause believers to stumble away from the faith. The warning is in reference to "later times" and the time is now, at least partially realized. Today, many false teachers misinterpret the Bible and cause believers to doubt their faith in God because of an inaccurate picture of His nature. They claim, for example, the health and wealth gospel that can cause people to harbor hatred toward God if they aren't as prosperous as they believe they should be. Be wary of teachers who claim anything about Christ that isn't in the Bible. Use Scripture for rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Ti 3:16) because it is the source of truth. Christians ought to believe and know the truth (1 Ti 4:3) to protect your faith from people who *will* come and try to make you falter.

Secondly, this passage guides Christians on how to properly relate with God. One ought to know Him intimately and through the knowledge of Him, receive His blessings with thankfulness and prayer. Enjoy all foods rather than practicing unnecessary asceticism. So remember all that God has done and give thanks for each blessing because that will lead to a flourishing relationship with the Creator God.

Conclusion

Taking a step back to see the big idea, this passage teaches its audience how to stay close to Jesus and avoid falling away. It assures people of correct doctrine and puts false teaching in its place. Paul implicitly refers to the biblical-theological ideas of prophecy, apostasy, eschatology,

inconsistency of Old Testament laws, creation, and Jesus' role in creation which all show how it fits well in the overarching narrative that Scripture tells. This passage gives insight to what the church was facing thousands of years ago and it rings true even today. It is important for the church because it concerns right doctrine and right practice. Overall, the church ought to believe that Jesus, the son of God, came to fulfill the law and enact his kingdom so that his people might get a glimpse of the fullness of creation and enjoy God forever.

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