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Are you correcting opponents with gentleness?

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2:22-26)

Dealing with theological opposition and false teaching with faithfulness and godliness is one of the more significant challenges facing the pastor-teacher, especially if we serve in a theologically mixed denomination.¹ It is helpful to see here

1. I owe much here to Peter Adam and his perceptive treatment of this section of the letter. Especially helpful is his suggestion, which I follow, that Paul outlines two strategies for dealing with two different kinds of opponent.





The Ministry Medical

that Paul expects that within the visible church in this age there will always be a mixture of converted and unconverted, faithful and unfaithful teachers of the Word. We have already thought about Hymenaeus and Philetus and their heresy in 2:17-18. We will go on in 3:1-9 to consider the impostors who follow in the footsteps of the men who opposed Moses long ago. In 2:20 Paul warns Timothy that in a 'large house' such as the Church of God 'there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble.' That is, the visible Church is a mixed place, and some teachers ('vessels' at least includes 'teachers' here, even if it includes non-teachers as well) will be dishonourable. This is not to say that we should content ourselves with a church structure that has no discernment in its appointment of leaders and no disciplinary structure for the removal of unfaithful teachers (we must have a robust structure that does both), but it is to say that we should not be shocked when false teachers come along and when other leaders oppose us when we faithfully teach the truth.

Here in this section of his letter (really from 2:14 to 3:9) Paul outlines two different strategies for dealing with two different kinds of opponents. There are, on the one hand, opponents who 'call on the Lord out of a pure heart' (v. 22) and who may be correctable (v. 26). On the other hand, there are corrupt impostors who look like Christians and seek to exercise influence, but are actually not converted (3:5, 8); they are to be avoided (3:5) and we should not waste our time with them.

In 2:22-26 Paul deals with the first kind of opponent: misguided people who are true believers, calling on the Lord out of a pure heart, and who need gentle correction, not excommunication. Paul recognises that Timothy's natural inclination will be to argue with opponents like this, but he is to flee that youthful passion and instead pursue 'righteousness, love, and peace' with other true believers, even if they are wrong in what they are teaching. His aim must be to convince



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them of the truth through gentle instruction from the Word in the prayerful hope that they will be given the gift of repentance and escape the devil's trap. In other words, his concern must be not to win the argument but to win the person.²

In practice this may mean spending more time engaging with other ministers within your denomination who you feel are misguided theologically. It may mean investing the time in attending ministry fraternals, or taking the initiative to set up a fellowship group or reading group with other ministers in your area. It may mean offering to read the Bible one-to-one with members of your church who are in particular need of instruction and doctrinal correction.

Who in your church or your denomination is misguided and opposing you, but nonetheless a true brother or sister in Christ who calls 'on the Lord out of a pure heart'? What has been your approach to them so far? Motivated by the prayerful hope that God might 'grant them repentance', what steps could you take to instruct them gently in the truth?

² Peter Adam.