

Preachers of Least Resistance

3:1) Know this: The last days will be dangerous times. 2) For people will love themselves and money; they will be braggarts, arrogant, blasphemers, and disobey parents. People will be ungrateful, unholy, 3) without empathy, unresponsive, and spiteful. They will lack self-control and gentleness, without love for what is good. 4) They will be traitors and reckless, deluded lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. 5) They will make a public appearance of godliness but will resist its power. Have nothing to do with them. 6) Now some slither into households and take control of immature women weighed down by sins and driven by various desires. 7) They are forever learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth. 8) In the same way that Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these people oppose the truth. They ruin the mind and counterfeit the faith. 9) But like those others, they won't get very far; their mindlessness will be obvious to all.

Engaging 2 Timothy 3:1–9 as Scripture

Paul envisions the “last days” of human history as a time of great peril (3:1). Misdeeds of every kind will abound (3:2–5a) and believers should have nothing to do with those who practice them (3:5b). Paul goes on to describe those with power during these “dangerous times” as opponents of the truth who will seek to subvert the faith of a congregation’s immature members (3:6–8). At the same time, those who practice falsehood will be publicly exposed as religious frauds (3:9). The “last days” mark out a dangerous time for God’s creation; but also a time of great opportunity for people who love God to despise what God despises and resist any attempt to unsettle God’s way of ordering the world.

The relevant question is, how does the Creator respond to an unhealthy world that has rejected the very word that formed it? The reader awaits the next passage for Paul’s response. A triad of exhortations prepares Timothy for the coming of Christ Jesus

to judge the living and the dead (4:1). In particular, Paul presents himself as Timothy's role model during these last days (3:10–13) and then scripture as an auxiliary of the Divine Breath to make him into a "man of God" who is wise for salvation and mature for every good work (3:14–17).

According to the periodic compartmentalization of history sponsored by apocalyptic Judaism, "the last days" is a season of spiritual testing over an indefinite period of time that falls immediately prior to the final actions taken by the messiah to inaugurate the new creation promised by God (cf. Luke's rewriting of LXX Joel 3:1 in Acts 2:17). At the present time, the "last days" of salvation's history are in play and they are "dangerous times" precisely because faith is imperiled; these are dangerous days for an immature people because of an overabundance of clever pundits who "ruin the mind and counterfeit the faith" (3:8) to promote a "deluded love of pleasure rather than of God" (3:4).

The admonition to "know this," on the one hand, continues his prior exhortation that Timothy aspire to be a "special utensil" who is ready for "every good work" to benefit the household of God (2:20–26). It is a pastor's "good work," then, to sound an alert to the dangers that threaten the congregation's life with God. At the same time, this passage forms an apt contrast to the example of faithfulness left by Paul (3:10–13) and to the role performed by scripture in shaping the "man of God" for "every good work" (3:15–17).

Moreover, Paul's implied claim is that the word of truth (3:8; cf. 4:2), which sets out a pattern of healthy teaching, orders human life in a manner that loves God rather than self-centered pleasure (cf. 3:4). When this truth is rejected, the results are morally catastrophic. "Knowing this" is central to Christian catechesis instruction (cf. 3:1) and so the very mark of spiritual immaturity is to be "forever learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth" (3:7), even as the essential characteristic of the enemies of God is that they "ruin the mind and counterfeit the faith" (3:8). Knowing the apostolic

rule of faith is baseline for Christian existence, not only because it empowers good works but because it enables one to know who and what religious impiety and ethical impurity to avoid. But the stated purpose of this Pauline apocalypse is to sound a cautionary note ever present to its readers “until that day”: the cultural situation of the present age is “dangerous” precisely because it makes the prospect of sharing in Christ’s sinlessness a very hard possibility. While moral purity and genuine piety (cf. 1 Tim 6:3–10) herald the coming victory of God over sin and death, intermingling with “deluded lovers of pleasure rather than God” is another threat to Christian existence that must be avoided (3:4–5).

Typical of the apocalyptic genre is a lengthy catalogue of bad works, which not only warns of an increase of public and personal evils but also provides a negative example of the sort of person Timothy must avoid (3:2–5; cf. 3:13). He must rather imitate Paul (cf. 3:10–12). Each vice listed is easily found in the polemical writings of Greco-Roman philosophers such as Aristotle and Thucydides; and most are found in other Pauline letters. In fact, the combination of “last days” (3:1) and “people” (3:2) would seem to indicate that Paul is engaging in cultural criticism of a biblical kind. “Last days” is a well-known prophetic catchphrase (cf. LXX Joel 3:1–5; Isa 2:2; Hos 3:5), used only here in the Pauline collection (but see “latter times,” 1 Tim 4:1), which refers to a particular but indeterminate time of testing that culminates in divine judgment (cf. 2 Pet 3:1–7; Rev 13:11–18). This is a “dangerous time,” then, in a spiritual sense because cultural currents — intellectual, moral, political, societal — occasion a readiness for spiritual defection, which will result in God’s eschatological indictment. The future tense of Paul’s warning expresses a present certainty: “the last days” are already here to test the community’s allegiance to God.

The essential crisis of the “last days,” which makes it a dangerous time, is that it is a fertile time for those who “ruin the mind and counterfeit the faith” (3:9). The confusion of those households into which they “slither,” to prompt a species of learning

that results in the “immature women” of those households “forever learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth” (3:6–7) and so are never saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:4), is the mark of trouble. Perhaps this reflects the religious crisis occasioned by Paul’s departure, when the apostle is no longer on site pointing out the bad guys and discriminating between their fraudulent teaching and his own “healthy teaching” (cf. 4:2–4).

This catalogue of vices is so striking because it is the most extensive description of evil found in the Pauline letters. The explanatory “For” introduces people who sound a culture’s last gasp, a trope of human culture disposed against God’s way of ordering the world by selfless love (see 1 Tim 1:4–5). To make this point more expressive, the listing of vices appears carefully crafted into a vaguely chiasmic shape, bracketed by pairs of Greek words, beginning with *phil-*, which express love’s mislocation: lovers of self (*philautoi*) and lovers of money (*philargyroi*; 3:2a) who love pleasure (*philēdonoi*) rather than God (*philotheoi*; 3:4b). Sandwiched between these illicit lovers is a series of eight social evils — evils that would gut the community’s well-being — each one an alpha-privative (3:2c–3) that together are wrapped around that diabolical catchword “spiteful” (*diaboloι*).¹

The rhetorical effect of Paul’s shaping of this list of horrors creates a memorable literary alliteration when read aloud that impresses its auditors all the more of humanity’s dismal portrait when lacking in a robust experience of divine love. For this reason, Paul can conclude that even though there remains an external form of “godliness” — an important catchword in the Pastoral Epistles for the practice of true religion — without the presence of God there can be no means of “power.” The repetition of “power” (*dynamis*) is ironical, since it recalls its prior use in 1:7–8 of God’s

¹ Knight makes the attractive observation that the centrality of *διάβολοι* (*diaboloι*), “spitefulness,” actually recalls the person who cannot escape the “devil’s trap” (2:26) and so sours him on household relationships; *Pastoral Epistles*, 432.

power conveyed by the indwelling holy Spirit (cf. 1:14) in the company of the Pauline gospel. The absence of “power” indicates an absence of the Spirit and gospel’s truth; and the absence of this indicates a lack of salvation.

Paul concludes this catalogue with an exhortation to “have nothing to do with them” (3:5b). Most take this to resume the letter’s earlier warning about opponents of his gospel, whose spread of gangrenous influence has undermined the faith of some believers (so 2:17–18). I doubt this, since Paul has just written that Timothy should engage the opponents to correct them in prospect of their repentance and redemption (so 2:22–26). Rather, this warning concludes Paul’s biting criticism of secular culture in general, whose denial of the truth about God results in a way of life devoid of grace. To separate from those who populate and define such a world is to enjoin the work of God.

The use of another explanatory “now” (3:6) signals a more particular reason for Timothy to be on the alert for the tactics of those who appear godly as the pretense to gain influence — a classic depiction of malevolence. The word translated “slither” to capture this sense literally means “to power into,” and clearly plays off the previous sentence’s conception of divine presence: without God’s personal power at work, the power used to order human relationships is abusive and undermines human love. In this case, their tactic is to influence “immature women” based on a common caricature of middleclass women in antiquity. (Working-class women, perhaps employed as household servants, would not have the luxury to sit down and listen to the teaching of these people, nor would it have been polite to do so in Paul’s world, even if it had been permitted.)

Epictetus denounced middleclass women as “silly,” because they often used their freedom and leisure to spend on satisfying their material passions rather than on a life of the mind (*Discourses* 15). Paul’s countervailing example is of middleclass Christian women in 1 Tim 2:9–11 who spend their leisure time engaged in philanthropic works and learning. This description of women as “weighed down by sins and driven

by various desires,” then, is obviously not a blanket statement about all women, immature or otherwise, but continues an important thematic of the Timothy correspondence concerning the salvation of Christian women (see 1 Tim 2:15; 5:13–15). While certainly shaped by the patriarchy of Paul’s world and perhaps even echoing its philosophers who sometimes deprecated women to score rhetorical points at their expense, the core principle at stake in this text concerns the sacred space of the Christian household as the locale of spiritual nurture: a person’s immaturity makes him susceptible to falsehood. Especially when approached as a canonical text whose audience is universal and ongoing, Paul’s concern is updated and aimed at any uneducated or spiritually immature person with time on his hands. With this in mind, we have translated the noun *gynaikari* (lit. “small women”), “immature women,” to clarify this working principle: these are female believers whose spiritual immaturity, not yet brought to maturity by the word of truth, is more easily seduced by false appearance.²

Paul’s symbolic world is primarily Jewish and biblical. His unqualified description of moral and societal chaos is a feature of apocalyptic writings such as 2 Esdras and Daniel, which had significant influence on Jesus’ understanding of salvation’s future (cf. Mark 13:5–27). And his reference to Jannes and Jambres for comparison (3:8) roots his entire “last days” polemic in the story of the Exodus. Although their names are not found in the OT, these two shadowy figures were reputed to be members of the Pharaoh’s court according to the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum on Exodus 1:15 and Midrash *Tanhuma* on Exodus 32:1. The Dead Sea Scroll, CD 5.17–19, says,

For in ancient times God visited their deeds and His anger was kindled against their works; for it is a people of no discernment, it is a nation void of counsel

² See Johnson, *1–2 Timothy*, 411–14, who reminds readers that this same theme continues in an even more exaggerated form in the second-century apocryphal writing *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

inasmuch as there is not discernment in them. For in ancient times, Moses and Aaron arose by the hand of the Prince of Lights and Satan in his cunning raised up Jannes and his brother when Israel was first delivered.

In fact, their story was evidently so familiar to Timothy that Paul does not need to recall anything but their names to make his point; and set within the Exodus story the outcome of this contest is known: even as God delivered Israel from the Pharaoh, despite the opposition of Jannes and Jambres, so also will God expose these teachers as frauds and so the evident folly of those who are bamboozled by them and reject the faith.

If conversion is depicted as a “coming to the knowledge of the truth” (see 1 Tim 2:4; cf. 2 Tim 2:25; 3:7b), then logically those who are indicted by God — the “Janneses and Jambreses” of the community — are those who oppose this same truth. The “word of truth” refers to the Pauline gospel, whose eschatological role is the criterion of God’s final judgment. This seems a crucial point for Paul to make in a letter of succession in which the principal task is the preservation and transmission of the Pauline apostolate. Timothy’s task participates in the apocalypse of divine judgment precisely because he is commissioned to handle the word of truth on which God’s end-time verdict will be based.

This stands as a haunting passage. Spiritual immaturity is described as a disciple’s desire to learn but without “ever coming to a knowledge of the truth” (3:7b; cf. 1 Tim 2:4), consigned thereby to judgment: an enemy from within. But then the evident enemies of God are further described as those who “oppose the truth” and “ruin the mind” because they teach others without having the intellectual equipment to do so: they are “mindless” (lit., “without a mind”) and so need to come to a knowledge of the truth for their salvation. Unlike Hymenaeus and Philetus (see 2:17), however,

their rigorous opposition to the truth forges a situation in which these preachers of least resistance and their congregations of “itching ears” are truly hopeless.

Engaging 2 Timothy 3:1–9 for Congregational Leaders

This passage begins with the words, “Know this: The last days will be dangerous times.” It may be helpful to the pastor and teacher to recognize a certain parallel between this text and the apocalyptic sections of each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21). Like those chapters, this passage warns of a coming time of chaos and confusion when faith will be challenged on multiple fronts. The intent of those chapters of the gospels and this part of 2 Timothy is to prepare believers for such world-ending, world-beginning times of shaking and to equip them to stand fast when everything seems to be coming unglued.

That said, phrases like “the last days” may be, at least for some contemporary readers, more alarming and off-putting than helpful or suggestive. They may conjure images of a red-faced preacher angrily condemning sins (and sinners) of which he himself is a secret perpetrator. Or they may suggest preachers who play on people’s fears and anxieties with precise dates and timetables for God’s unfolding activity and for their own predictions of “the end of the world.” Ironically, it is of such false preachers and teachers that both the synoptic apocalyptic material of the gospels and 2 Timothy 3 seek to warn readers to beware.

Perhaps a different angle of approach to the language of the last days and the catalogue of sins and sinners that follows in 2 Timothy 3: 2–4 is suggested by contemporary fantasy literature. The growing popularity of this genre (think Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, the *Twilight* series, *The Hunger Games*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Ghosthunters*, *Being Human* and more) would appear to be — at least in part — that it offers a way of speaking of apocalyptic themes to contemporary audiences of youth and

young adults (and increasingly as well, older adults). Such literature assumes that reality is not always what it appears to be. There is deception and intrigue. There is another reality or dimension operating alongside the visible one. But most of all there is a great cosmic struggle being waged between good and evil in which the characters in the story have a decisive part to play.

What I am suggesting is that there is an entire, and increasingly popular, genre of contemporary literature all around us that is offering a imaginative world and targeting points similar to those of 2 Timothy 3: 1–9. Points such as the following: moral chaos and confusion, false leaders (or people in leadership positions), deceptive teachers, and in the midst of it all an unfolding conflict between good and evil, or, in biblical language, between the powers of Sin and Death, on one hand, and the Kingdom of God and of his Christ, on the other.

Consider, for example, a brief excerpt from *Mockingjay*, the third book in “The Hunger Games” trilogy. Here a character describes the moral chaos of the ruling Capitol. “Finnick begins to weave a tapestry so rich in detail that you can’t doubt its authenticity. Tales of strange sexual appetites, betrayals of the heart, bottomless greed, and bloody power plays.”³ This sounds not unlike 2 Timothy 3: 2, “For people will love themselves and money; they will be braggarts, arrogant, blasphemers . . . ungrateful, unholy.” My point is not to suggest that our passage is somehow legitimated by parallel themes in popular contemporary literature. It is, however, to suggest that both address a similar issue and concern of faith: that in times of massive change and confusion people are tempted to believe that their lives and life itself lack moral meaning or coherence.

In such times people are tempted to think, “Nothing really matters, so go for it and get what you can,” or, as Paul puts it elsewhere, that God and God’s ways can be

³ Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (Scholastic Press, 2010), p. 171.

“mocked” without consequence. Against such counsels of despair, Paul warns Timothy and the church, “Know this: The last days will be dangerous times.” They will be dangerous precisely because in such times faith shall be threatened — and tested — by moral chaos and undermined by appealing but deceptive teachers. Pastoral leaders are, therefore, to be on guard and vigilant. They are not to be surprised by harsh opposition, nor by serious threats to faith, to the church, and to life as God intended it. Nor are they to be surprised by a world in which things are not as they seem to be. You, Paul tells Timothy and pastoral leaders in our own time, are engaged in a great moral struggle, a struggle for the truth of the gospel. We should not be harsh or shrill in our witness to the truth, but neither should we adjust or accommodate a world of moral and theological confusion and indifference.

Beyond this attempt to frame these nine verses and what is at stake here for pastoral leaders today, I would focus several additional comments on three particular verses in this pericope, verses 5, 7 and 8. To offer some “headlines”: verse 5 raises the question of power in relation to faith and leadership. Verse 7 points to the tension in the life of faith between search and commitment. And verse 8 we will call “naming names.”

Power, faith, and leadership. In 3:5, Paul speaks of deceptive teachers who “will make a public appearance of godliness but will resist its power.” A slightly different note is sounded in the NSRV translation of the same verse, which reads, “holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power.” There are at least several possibilities suggested by this verse. One is a chronic temptation facing people in positions of authority and religious leadership to “go through the motions” or “play it safe.” Leaders speak in stained-glass churchy voice and utter spiritual platitudes, but never ask people (including themselves) to experience that power of God that operates best when we are outside our comfort zone. Religious leadership in general and Christian leadership in particular bring with them a language, a role, and rites and rituals that can be used to go deeper into God or to avoid the very same thing, leaving

us with something that is no more than “the outward form of godliness” and without real power.

A second possible interpretation of verse 5 in our contemporary context involves how we understand power in relation to religious leadership. There are, it seems to me, two common distortions. One is to think that all power is bad, inherently evil. The best pastors, according to this construal, avoid power and the exercise of power. They defer to others. They do not challenge. They may facilitate, but they seldom lead. The second common misconception when it comes to power and pastoral leadership is that power means “bossing other people around.” Jesus describes this common use of power in the world, “lording it over others.” Neither avoiding power nor lording it over others is faithful or helpful. Clergy, who steward the mysteries of the gospel, do hold great power — as a trust. Moreover, the gospel itself is power, as Paul makes clear in 1 Thessalonians 1: 5, “For we know, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only but *also in power*” (emphasis added). This power (*dynamis*), which is of God, is entrusted to pastoral leaders in order that they may bring people to a deeper knowledge of God in Christ and build up the church. It is not power conferred for personal advantage or to further one’s self-interest. (For more on this theme, see pages 177–81 in *Called to Lead*.)

A third interpretative direction on verse 5 and the “outward form of godliness but denying its power” is to note the contemporary embrace of “spirituality.” At least sometimes the new emphasis on spirituality becomes largely about me and my spiritual life and practices. It is about me taking more time apart for myself. Me getting in touch with the spark of the divine within me. Me feeling a kind of glow or connectedness as I watch the sunset. While there is perhaps nothing intrinsically wrong with any of this, it is a far cry from the power of the gospel, which has less to do with our spirituality than with God’s gracious and disruptive intrusion into our safe and settled (and sometimes “spiritual”) worlds. In other words, contemporary infatuation with spirituality can, at

least sometimes, offer the outward appearance of godliness but without the gospel's power.

The tension between search and commitment. Verse 7 speaks of those who are “forever learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth.” Honestly, this sometimes feels like what we called “adult education” in the church. That is, we are forever coming up with some hot new program based on a new and exciting book or video series or “the latest scholarly research” or the “seven steps to effective Christian living.” One after another these classes, programs, and seminars are rolled out. But somehow they are of little lasting consequence. Okay, some may change lives. Some may lead us to new and deepened devotion to Christ and so to authentic discipleship. But many do not. Instead of owning the faith and become agents and apostles of the gospel, we keep on attending classes, keep on “growing,” but never come to decision or commitment. While this lament is certainly an overstatement of the pitfalls of church adult education, it may not be too far off the mark either. I prefer those ventures that engage people in catechesis that aims toward baptism into Christ or the renewal of baptismal promises and then the joys of baptismal living. We search, learn and explore, but towards an end, towards change, toward commitment to Christ and his Kingdom.

As a somewhat different but related take on “forever learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth,” I recall being a participant in a panel of religious leaders, each representing a different faith or denomination. One of the panelists spoke of his congregation as being all about “The Search.” “For us there is only The Search, the never-ending human search for meaning, for God, for truth. But we will never find it. We invite people to The Search.” He continued on in this vein at some length, and with no little pride in the enlightened nature of his and his congregation's constant pursuit. After a while I grew restive and feeling somewhat mischievous I asked him, “Say someone actually finds something (or is found by something/someone) . . . what happens then? Do they have to leave your church?”

Searching has its place. Questions are important and should be heard and honored. But in the end, our search for God is less important than God's search for us. There is a tension to be maintained between searching and finding, between growing and commitment, between further learning and decision expressed in action.

Naming names. In verse 8, and as part of the larger discussion of leaders and teachers who oppose the truth, Paul mentions "Jannes and Jambres." Bible students will look in vain for other references in their Bible dictionaries or concordances to "Jannes and Jambres." There is a pretty good chance that Jannes and Jambres aren't people we've ever heard of before. As the exegesis notes, these two are mentioned only in Jewish Midrash. They may have been members of the Pharaoh's court. So why bother naming these names? Here are a couple thoughts suggested by the very obscurity of these names.

First, while real people will oppose the truth of the gospel, many (who may be or seem to be big and impressive or threatening at the time) will fade into obscurity as time goes on. They will disappear from the sacred story of the congregation, perhaps turning up in some obscure reference but no more. Their books will fade and gather dust. Their once "new and exciting" teaching will come "old and faded." To be sure, they may be a royal pain in the neck at the time. They may represent a real threat. But in the long run they don't count for much. So take opponents seriously, but don't exaggerate their importance or overestimate their potency. "Tend," as Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16, "to yourself and your teaching."

Second, with care and fairness, it is permissible, even necessary, for pastors to engage and critique alternate presentations of the gospel or spiritual truth that they judge false or deceptive. These days there are all sorts of Christian and non-Christian teachers, schools of thought, gurus, and personality-based churches. Some may be New Age, some right- or left-wing. Some may be new Gnostics or re-new Pelagians. Docetism is never out of fashion for long — as in "Pastor, now you just tend to the

spiritual things and leave the business of the church to us.” I am not suggesting a “witch hunt” mentality. But I am suggesting a careful examination of the truth claims of some of those teachers that come to the attention of people in our congregations and about which people may ask, “What are they saying? Do they have it right? In what respects are we similar and in what ways different?” Again, without being shrill or unfair to opponents or alternatives, it is important to examine and test them against the truth of the gospel.

Paul offers us a “high understanding” of the pastoral office here in 1 and 2 Timothy, and particularly in 2 Timothy 3. “High” does not mean wealth, worldly power, or its trappings. It does mean that pastors have great spiritual power and great responsibility. They are in the business of the care and cure of souls. This matters. It matters eternally. It is serious business and pastoral leaders ought to expect a few fights. It remains a dangerous time to be lovers of God.

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