The late comedian George Carlin was once asked if he still supported the adage from the 1960s, "challenge authority." He said, “No;” his new adage was, “destroy authority.”¹ Challenging authority is deeply rooted in us as sinners; it is becoming increasingly prevalent in our society; and is even evident in our churches. And as we’ll see, when God’s authority is challenged there are serious consequences.

In Genesis 2:16 God established his authority over man through his spoken word. He said to Adam and Eve, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Satan then tempted Adam and Eve by calling into question the authoritative word of God in Genesis 3:1, 4; “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’... ‘You will not surely die...’” When Adam and Eve sinned by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were ultimately rebelling against the authoritative Word of God. **And rebellion against God’s authoritative Word is a matter of life and death.**

But not only were Adam and Eve rebels; we like them, begin rebelling against authority at an early age. How many of you as children at one time said to someone else, “You’re not the boss of me.” By nature we want to challenge authority. The Bible tells us that “we all like sheep have gone astray, we have turned – every one –to his own way” (Isa. 53:6). We are sinners by nature and by choice who choose our own way and our own laws, rebelling against and swerving from the authoritative Word of God.

And our culture, made up of rebels, is no different. Our culture is constantly saying something along the lines of “you’re not the boss of me,” especially in regard to the authoritative Word of God. If you’ve paid attention to the news at all in recent days, it is clear the culture at large has no intention of submitting to what the authoritative Word of God says about how to live.² No, we as individuals and as a society desire to be autonomous. What autonomy means literally is “self-law” – we want to be able to decide; we want to be the boss of ourselves. The Bible calls this desire iniquity, remember that as we go along.

In our text this morning we come to a shift in focus in the book of 2 Timothy. Paul begins addressing the false teaching that Timothy is up against. At the heart of the false teaching is a rejection of God’s authoritative Word. And as we will see, their rejection of authority is serious – it is a matter of life and death.

Our practice in this church is to spend most of our time on the text at hand. But this morning, I feel the need to take a brief detour before we get to the text at hand. In order to understand the

¹ Timothy Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, p. 76.
authority that is being challenged in 2 Timothy and in order to understand how we face the same dangers today we need to spend some time asking the question, “Who rules the church?”

**Who rules the church?**

Who’s the boss? Who gets to decide what to believe and how to live?³ There are three levels to this answer.

1. At the first and most obvious level God rules the church. As creator, God has the ultimate authority over all, including the church; there is no higher authority; there is no higher court of appeal.

2. But at another level, God the Father has placed Christ over his church giving him complete authority. Christ says in Matthew 28:18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me;” Christ is the head of the Church (Col. 1:18).

3. But while it is true Christ ultimately rules the church, he does so indirectly. John Stott has said, “Scripture is the scepter by which Christ rules the church.” ⁴ Let me explain how this works.

In the Great Commission, right after Jesus says that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, Christ commands the church to make disciples by teaching all peoples to obey everything that Christ commanded. In other words, **Christ’s authority is connected to his words.** And the words of Christ, as well as words about Christ’s work and the significance of that work, were eventually written down in what we call the New Testament. It is important to note that the words of Christ also affirm the authority of the Old Testament. So, the Word of God serves as our authority in the church, both the Old and New Testaments.⁵

But before we were given the full New Testament as we have it today the church lived in a time when the apostles were given authority over the church, as Christ’s ambassadors. The apostles were given an authority unlike anyone else in human history, except for Christ himself.

The apostles were men in the first century who had seen the risen Lord and had been given a special commission to found and build up the first churches (cf. Acts 9:1-2).⁶ They did this by speaking the Word of God in the power of the Spirit, as the book of Acts gives testimony to. But unlike us they didn’t have a New Testament. The Word of God that they were speaking was straight from God, like the prophets in the Old Testament.

As Jesus had promised, the Spirit brought to mind the words of Christ and brought to mind other things that Jesus’ disciples couldn’t “bear to hear” when he was on earth (John 16:12-15). These words were inspired by the Holy Spirit, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and used by God to form and strengthen the early churches (e.g. Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20).⁷ These God-breathed words were then written down and received as the authoritative Word of God by the early churches.

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³ Authority can be defined as the right to command belief and action. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 268.

⁴ John Stott, “Affirming Scripture’s Authority.”

⁵ For a good argument of the authority of the Old Testament being affirmed by Jesus and the apostles, see J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, pp. 51-67.


The apostles had authority because they spoke the very Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). J.I. Packer has said it this way, “Apostolic utterances are the truth of Christ and possess the authority of Christ; they are to be received as words of God, because what they convey is, in fact, the word of God.”

Paul viewed his own words as authoritative (1 Cor. 11:2; 14:37-38; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6). And Peter viewed Paul’s letters as authoritative and even referred to them as Scripture (2 Pt. 3:16). The apostles own sense of their authority comes out especially strong in regard to the apostolic gospel. Paul viewed the gospel he preached as a gospel he received from God (1 Cor. 15:1ff; 2 Tim. 1:9-12). And in the book of Galatians Paul boldly states, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8).

Apostles had authority, as bearers of the Word of God, in the early church. As Protestants we believe that apostolic office died when they died. But we are still an apostolic church because we have the apostles teaching in the Scriptures. So, let’s get back to our question. Who rules the church? Christ rules the church by the scepter of his Word, the apostolic Word. We must submit to this authoritative Word; it’s a matter of life and death.

Let’s now turn to our text this morning, 2 Timothy 2:14-19. It is my hope that this brief detour from 2 Timothy will throw light on our passage this morning.

2 Timothy 2:14–19 (ESV)

14 Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. 16 But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, 17 and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. 19 But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”

In this passage Paul gives Timothy 3 or 4 commands, depending on how you count. I’d simply like to divide the text into negative commands (what to avoid) and positive commands (what to do). In summary: Stay away from false teaching and stay committed to God’s Word.

**STAY AWAY FROM TEACHING THAT TURNS AWAY FROM GOD’S GOSPEL.**

The first command in verse 14 is for Timothy to remind them about these things. Two questions come to mind. Who is he to remind? And what is he to remind them of? He’s to remind the faithful men spoken of in verse 2 (viz. the elders of the church at Ephesus) about the truths of the gospel, especially the truths spoken of in verses 8-13 regarding the resurrection. This is all a part of the authoritative apostolic message that was given to Paul by God and is being passed on to Timothy (1:12, 14). Who will in turn pass it on to faithful men who will teach others (2:2).

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8 J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism*, p. 64.
And this reminder of the resurrection needs to include a strong charge to the elders of the church to not quarrel about words. Then in verse 16 Paul tells Timothy to avoid irreverent babble. What is he talking about? What are the words they aren’t supposed to quarrel about?

Well, I’ll start by saying what he’s not talking about. He’s not talking about general bickering. There are other places in Scripture that tell us not to quarrel in general, but here Paul is speaking of something specific.

Look in 1:13 where Paul tells Timothy to “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me…” I believe these sound words are the words that shouldn’t be quarreled about. If you look back at 1:9-10 we see what those words are.

2 Timothy 1:9–10 (ESV)

9 [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, 10 and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...

These are the words he’s speaking of when Paul tells Timothy to charge the elders to not quarrel about words. He’s referring to the word of truth, the gospel (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15; Eph. 1:13). This gospel announces Jesus Christ showed up in real time and history as the Son of God to abolish death (by his crucifixion) and to bring life and immortality to light (by his resurrection). These are the words of the apostolic and authoritative gospel; the word of truth. They are God’s words, not merely the words of a man. Therefore, the veracity of these words is not up for discussion. They shouldn’t quarrel about them.

It’s like a man who went to see the Mona Lisa. After looking at it for some time he said to the guard, “I don’t like it.” To which the guard replied, “Sir, these paintings are no longer being judged; their viewers are.” Paul’s gospel is God’s gospel. It is not being judged; those who fail to receive it are.

The false teachers rejected this authoritative, apostolic gospel, or at least some key truths that flow out of this gospel. Verse 18 tells us that they had swerved from the truth, the gospel. These guys had taken their eye off the straight and narrow gospel road and had swerved into the ditch. They have messed with the message of the gospel. And when that happens it’s a big deal.

In 2:8-13 we learn that one of the truths of the gospel is the fact that there will be a future bodily resurrection for all who have believed the gospel (esp. v. 11). In verse 18 we’re told that Hymenaeus and Philetus are saying that the future resurrection of believers has already taken place. They were probably reducing believers’ resurrection to a spiritual resurrection denying a future physical resurrection altogether. They were likely doing what so many have done throughout church history. They were teaching a false gospel that promises that people can have the blessings of the not-yet age to come right now.

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10 George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles.*

11 Mike Bullmore, “Five Convictions About Preaching, Without Which One Should Not Preach.”
Why is this a big deal? For one, if there are no future blessings to look forward to (viz. the promise that we will be raised with him and reign with him vv. 11-12) then why would anyone endure suffering for the sake of gospel ministry right now?

We see the desire to experience now the not-yet blessings of the age to come in the health and wealth gospel. The health and wealth gospel promises the future blessings of the gospel now – freedom from sickness and provision of material blessings. But the Bible doesn’t promise these things now. The Bible promises suffering now for all who promote the gospel. The blessings that we can experience now through faith in the gospel are forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ. And if we are in Christ we can look forward to the hope of future freedom from sickness and death, but those blessings are not-yet.

We also see the desire to experience now the not-yet blessings of the age to come in the social gospel. The social gospel seeks the welfare and justice of the weak and oppressed. And it is right to alleviate human suffering to the degree that we can. But we must remember that until Christ returns there will always be poverty, sickness, and injustice. We can’t usher in the blessings of the eternal kingdom now. And we must never seek to alleviate temporary human suffering now at the expense of proclaiming the gospel which deals with eternal suffering. That’s not loving.

We must preach the gospel as it has been given to us and not seek to add to it or subtract from it. I recently heard someone say that they simply preach Jesus. And then they went on to say that if you just preach Jesus then there won’t be all of the division we see in churches and in world religions. “Jesus unites; Christianity divides” was a main part of his message. But what was implied in all of this was we only need Jesus’ teaching and his example. What was implied was preaching a Jesus without a cross, without a resurrection, without deity, without the title Christ, without the exclusive claim that he was the promised Savior of the world who fulfilled the Old Testament promises, without his claim to be the only Way to God.

That, my friends, is what we call taking away from the gospel that has been given to us by God. That is rejecting the authoritative Word of God. And when we rebel against the authoritative Word of God it is a matter of life and death.

If this gospel is called into question, or quarreled about, then eternal life is on the line. Without this gospel the hope of immortality and a future full redemption is called into question. If you reject the authoritative word of God then you will surely die.

Paul tells Timothy that dabbling in this type of irreverent babble will lead to ungodliness, it will ruin those who hear it, and it is a breeding ground for gangrene. What is gangrene? Gangrene is death of tissue in part of the body. Gangrene happens when a part of your body loses blood supply. The God-given gospel of Jesus Christ, that he died for our sins and was raised from the dead, is like a blood supply to the body of Christ. When any part of the body loses this blood supply it will be infected with life-threatening disease.

The other night at dinner my friend Jason Wenzel was telling me about the documentary 127 Hours. This documentary tells the story of Aron Ralston, a rock climber whose arm got pinned by a bolder. He was stuck in the rock for 127 hours. The blood supply to his arm was cut off and he developed gangrene. Because of this, and the more obvious fact that he was pinned to the
rock, he cut his arm off with a dull knife. He knew that if he didn’t cut off his arm he would die. He sacrificed his arm for the sake of his whole body.

If there is any hint of a false gospel in our churches or in our lives we have to cut this stuff off, for it will spread like gangrene and ruin the body of Christ. We must avoid it.

The gospel must be kept intact so that it can be passed on to future generations. Without the intact, God-given, authoritative gospel there is no life, there is no church. This gospel must be protected from false teaching. And the best way to protect this gospel so that it can be passed on to future generations is by faithfully preaching it. And that is why Paul gives Timothy the second command in verse 15.

**STAY COMMITTED TO TEACHING THAT IS STRAIGHT FROM GOD’S GOSPEL.**

2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV)

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”

Timothy is commanded to handle the word of God rightly. This Greek verb orthotomeō literally means to “cut straight.” You may recognize the prefix if you’ve ever had braces. Ortho means straight. You go to the orthodontist to get your teeth straight. If you handle the word of truth rightly you keep it straight. Or literally, you cut it straight.

The false teachers at Ephesus had not cut the gospel straight; they had swerved from the truth (v. 18). Timothy is being commanded to keep his teaching on the on the straight and narrow. Or as my Hebrew professor loved to say, “Stick with the text!” The false teachers had rejected the authoritative, apostolic gospel; they had failed to stick with God’s Word. Timothy is being commanded to handle the authoritative, apostolic gospel rightly.

At this church we are committed to expository preaching, not just out of preference, but because we believe it is critical to the life of the church. To preach in an expository way is to expose the Word of God. In other words, our goal in expository preaching is to say what the Bible says instead of using the Bible to say what we want to say. We believe that when the Bible is exposed, the voice of God is heard in the church and we believe that when the voice of God is heard in the church, God breathes life into his church.

The simplest definition of expository preaching I know of comes from Mark Dever. “The point of the sermon is the point of the text.” My definition is a not as simple, but I’ll give it to you anyway. **Expository preaching presents the content and the intent of a particular passage to a particular people and urges them to respond in an appropriate manner by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

Expository preaching is the most faithful application I know of to 2 Timothy 2:15. We must stay committed to it. And let me tell you it is hard work to cut the Word straight. You can’t cut corners. But God’s voice must be heard in Christ’s church and so we labor on as workmen in this ministry.

Let me say that this work of rightly dividing the word of truth has been especially hard for me lately, but I’m committed to it. This quote by Bruce Thieleman has kept me on the straight and
narrow. “The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors; and like the sea, it
batters and bruises, and does not rest…to [prepare to] preach, to really [prepare to] preach, is to
die naked a little at a time and to know each time you do it that you must do it again.”

It’s hard work, but it must be done, because the Word of God must be heard and heeded in the
church – it’s a matter of life and death.

I think this command in verse 15 was primarily intended for those who labor in the ministry
preaching and teaching. However, it also applies to the whole church. Let me list three
applications.

First of all, the church must hold its teachers accountable to handling the Word of God rightly.
You should never take a preacher at his word unless he can show you that what he’s saying is
from God’s Word.

Secondly, if a preacher is saying what the Word of God says, you should not only be hearers of
the Word, but doers.

Thirdly, you shouldn’t limit your access to the Word of God to Sunday morning. You too can
and should read and study the Word of God. Let me challenge you to take Bible study
seriously. If you don’t know how to study the Bible I encourage you to learn. We can help
you.

Many people read the Bible in a caviler way and ultimately hear what they want to hear. You
too should take the command to do your best seriously. You too should cut the Word straight
and seek to understand what God really says. Don’t use the Bible to support what you want to
say and believe. This is the authoritative Word of God. We must study it with the attitude that
we are presenting ourselves to God. We can’t cut corners.

The reason Paul tells Timothy that he can’t cut corners is because while the apostolic gospel was
given to Timothy by Paul, it was given to Paul by God. Therefore, Timothy must keep God as
his audience as he handles God’s Word. He must present himself to God as one approved.

Next to Mike Andrus, one of the most influential men in my life when it comes to preaching is
Mike Bullmore. He’s a pastor in Kenosha, WI. And in addition to pastoring a church he
occasionally speaks on the topic of preaching. He tells his students to imagine that God is in the
audience listening to our preaching. And when we look at him, to ask if he is saying to us,
“Well, I can see where you got that,” or “Yes! That’s exactly what I mean and exactly what I
want my church to hear.”

I think that second response is the picture Paul has in mind when he commands Timothy to “do
your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed,
rightly handling the word of truth” (v. 15). We must be committed before God to makes sure
that we say what God says. Stay on the straight and narrow. Don’t swerve from the gospel.

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12 Quoted by Mike Bullmore, “Watch Your Preaching: Effective Sermon Preparation.”
13 Kathleen Nielsen’s Bible Study: Following the Ways of the Word is a good place to start.
14 Mike Bullmore, “Five Convictions About Preaching, Without Which One Should Not Preach.”
There will be false teaching in the church until Christ returns. But the Lord will sustain his church through the faithful preaching and teaching of his Word.

Look at verse 19. “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: The Lord knows those who are his,” and “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”

The church is described in 1 Timothy 3:15 as the pillar and buttress of truth. In other words, it is the pillar and buttress of the gospel. That is what grounds the church of God. The gospel is what enables us to stand as God’s firm foundation. And because this is the case we must turn away from teaching that turns from God’s gospel and stay committed to the authoritative Word of God, if we name the name of the Lord.

Rebellion against the authoritative Word of God is a matter of life and death.

When Paul says the Lord knows those who are his he is referencing Numbers 16:5. In Numbers 16 we are given the story of the rebellion of Korah. In this story Korah and his followers reject God’s appointed messenger Moses and his teaching. They also call into question the promise of a future entrance into the Promised Land. God made it clear that this rebellion against Moses was a rebellion against God and his Word, in the same way that the false teachers’ at Ephesus rejection of Paul’s apostolic gospel was a rejection of God’s gospel.

God punished the followers of Korah. Korah and his family were swallowed up by the earth. Those in cahoots with Korah were consumed by fire. And those who followed Korah’s teaching were killed by a plague.

Rebellion against the authoritative Word of God is a matter of life and death. But God knows those who are his – those who belong to God will turn from false teaching, which is iniquity, and turn toward God and his authoritative Word, the gospel.

Isaiah 53:6 says, “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned – every one – to his own way.” In other words, in our sin, we all desire to be autonomous from God’s law. But when we turn away from God’s Word we cut ourselves off from God’s life.

If we desire to have life we will turn away from our own way – we will turn away from iniquity – and we will turn toward God’s Word; we will believe God’s gospel. Isaiah 53:6 goes on to say, “but the LORD [“gospel” conjunction] has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” If we believe this Word we will have life. If we reject it, we will remain in sin and death.

It is my prayer that this church, the pillar and buttress of the gospel, will protect this Word, preach this Word, believe this Word, and pass this word on to future generations. For it is a matter of life and death.

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References


