

Itching Ears and Sound Doctrine

As the Apostle Paul was awaiting execution, he still found time to write to his spiritual son Timothy, reminding him of the hope that is in Christ. Paul exhorted Timothy to boldness, endurance, and faithfulness in the face of bold teaching, but he also showed his customary concern for sound doctrine. All Scripture is breathed out by God and is sufficient in all things pertaining to faith and practice of Christians (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Paul also warned Timothy that a time would come when *people will not endure sound doctrine, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,* ⁴ *and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths,* (2 Tim. 4:3-4). This looks to the future, a future for which Paul wants to prepare Timothy. What Paul describes will begin even during Timothy's ministry but increase in the "terrible times in the last days" (3:1).

Paul here distinguishes between what people need to hear and what they want to hear. What people need to hear is "sound doctrine." It is sound or healthy in that it says what God wants said. It comes from Him, and it produces spiritual health.

People "will not endure sound doctrine" because it does not say what they want to hear. It exposes their sin and proclaims condemnation. It does not flatter them with a recital of their great deeds and potential. When it proclaims deliverance from sin in the gospel, it does not make sense to human reason. An age that prides itself in man's great scientific accomplishments will not put up with the "foolishness" of "sound doctrine."

They will look for teachers who will "suit their own desires." By looking around long enough and going from teacher to teacher, they will find "a great number of teachers," also within churches that call themselves Christian, who say what they want to hear. Their ears "itch" to hear what flatters their egos, what gives credit to man, what satisfies natural desires and lusts, what makes sense to human reason or doesn't make any sense at all but delights man because he has dreamed it up, what deifies man (humanism).

Instead of listening to the truth of "sound doctrine," they turn to "myths," referred to as "godless myths" in 1 Timothy 4:7. Paul might have been thinking of the Gnostic speculations that were beginning and became a threat in later generations. Ultimately, every false doctrine is a "myth." One is amazed at the "myths" to which people turn: the "myths" of Roman Catholicism: purgatory, salvation by works, invocation of saints, papal infallibility; the "myths" of theologians who reinterpret Scripture to correspond to human reason; the "myths" of evolutionism; the "myths" of astrology and other superstitions; the "myths" of Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses; the "myths" of the New Age Movement. The list is endless. Ears itch to hear anything except God's revealed truth. Every cult and religion, even every new and different misinterpretation of Scripture, find receptive ears in a world that has grown weary of the gospel, of "sound doctrine."

Paul emphatically addresses Timothy: "But you ..." (2 Tim. 4:5). Yes, Timothy, and this includes all pastors and teachers serving in the terrible times Paul describes, is to be different. "Keep your head in all situations," or "be sober," not meant literally of abstaining from wine but that he should remain levelheaded, keep a clear head. He must not permit himself to become confused or carried away in these situations. He must recognize and expose the "myths" for what they are. This will bring hardship on him. This he will endure. Also in these evil times he will "do the work of an evangelist." He will continue to follow Jesus' command to "preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Timothy's assignment is to preach and keep on preaching the gospel. He must continue to "discharge all the duties of [his] ministry."

In a religiously confused world that will not put up with sound doctrine, it is vitally important that the church and its pastors remain sober, levelheaded, and not succumb to the temptation to adapt their teaching to what people want to hear. Our teaching must be sound according to God's revealed truth. This good news we must proclaim and keep on proclaiming, whatever hardships we might experience.