

Doctrine and Conduct: False Teachers and Teaching in 1 Timothy 6:3–5 as a Deviation from Orthodoxy

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Abstract

This paper presents an exegetical study of 1 Timothy 6:3–5 and an exploration of its critique of the prosperity gospel. The study examined the nature and effects of false doctrine as depicted in vs 3–5, with attention on the meaning of ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ) in 1 Timothy 6:3. The study employed the historical grammatical approach, which involved analyzing key words and phrases to establish the text's meaning and message. The study highlights that sound doctrine has its origins in the message of Jesus Christ and that it leads to godliness, whereas false doctrine leads to moral and cognitive corruption. It presents prosperity teaching as a departure from sound doctrine and, like the false teaching depicted in 1 Timothy 6:3–5, it leads to erroneous thinking about godliness and breeds greed and coveteousness among its propagators and adherents.

Keywords: Doctrine and Conduct, Heresy, False Teaching, False Teachers, Prosperity Gospel, Sound Doctrine

Introduction

Christians are expected to live up to the requirements of the faith in terms of conviction, character, and conduct. However, many professing Christians exhibit inconsistency between their conduct and Christian doctrine. A major reason for this is the increase in false doctrines, prominent among them is the prosperity gospel. The prosperity preachers, most of whom are televangelists, have a wide following both in the physical services and also through digital viewership.¹ The teaching and conduct of the prosperity preachers have not only attracted the interest and concern of

¹ Bernard Alwala, "The fate of prosperity gospel in Kenya," *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 2, no. 1 (2020): 15.



Christians but also those of the state. The prosperity doctrine has attracted considerable scrutiny over the years due to its negative effects on the spiritual well-being and livelihoods of its adherents.² It has promoted a lack of contentment, materialism, and greed among its proponents and adherents. There's therefore a need to understand the nature of false teaching and its effects as described in the Bible. This study examined 1 Timothy 6:3–5 and its application to prosperity teaching in Africa. False teaching is a deviation from sound doctrine, which leads to moral and cognitive corruption, such as the view that being godly should lead to financial gain. It is a view held by many prosperity teachers and their followers, who see salvation as a means of escaping poverty.³ Others have equated financial or material prosperity with spiritual prosperity.⁴

Background of the text

There has been a wide debate on the pastoral epistles' authorship, with Pauline authorship being disputed. Those who consider Paul the author point to internal evidence. They claim his greetings to Timothy need to be taken seriously, as they suggest a possible personal relationship between the two.⁵ From its contents, the letter was authored by Paul (v.1) to Timothy, whom he regarded as his son in the faith (v.2). Those who argue against Paul's authorship claim that it's a pseudonymous composition because it was authored about 40 years after Paul's death.⁶ Some scholars argue that the pastoral epistles are the work of a close disciple of Paul who used Paul's materials and some of his teachings after his death.⁷ Others argue against Paul's authorship because of differences in language style, vocabulary, and theological emphasis compared to his other letters.⁸ Timothy was overseeing the Ephesian church (1:3). Paul wrote to urge Timothy to continue his ministry in Ephesus, a significant political, commercial, and religious center.⁹ This was to ensure that certain men cease spreading false doctrines (1:3–4). The second reason was to give Timothy instructions about worship within the church (1 Tim 2) and to appoint elders (1 Tim

² Constantine Mwikamba and Stephen I. Akaranga, "Blessed are the Rich and Prosperous for Theirs is the Kingdom of this World: The Kenyan Challenge," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 5.14 (2015):139.

³ David T. Adamo, "The African Background of the Prosperity Gospel," *Theologia Viatorum* 45, no. 1 (2021): 3.

⁴ Samuel Oluwatosin Okanlawon, "Theological Interpretation of Key Biblical Passages Underpinning the Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria," *Calvin Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (2022): 82.

⁵ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester: Apollos [ua], 1990), 607.

⁶ Howard Marshall, Stephen Travis, and Ian Paul, *Exploring the New Testament: A Guide to the Letters and Revelation*. Vol. 2. (London: SPCK, 2002), 175.

⁷ Howard Marshall, Stephen Travis, and Ian Paul, *Exploring the New Testament*, 175.

⁸ Armin W. Schuetze, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (St. Louis, Missouri :Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 4.

⁹ J. A. Thompson et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (London: IVP Academic, 2003), 327-328.



3; 5:22). It contains a series of instructions to help him combat false teaching and maintain his faith and a good conscience. Timothy was required to demonstrate faithfulness as the Lord's servant by pointing out the truth to the church. The letter was written in the context of Greco-Roman culture, in which some philosophers used philosophy for their personal gain, and the error was spreading within the church as some used the gospel to accumulate wealth.¹⁰

Literary Context

The text of 1 Timothy 6:3–5 is set against the backdrop of a wrong attitude among believers who do not appear to show full respect to their believing masters (1 Tim 6:1–2). This is depicted in the kind of service they render to them. Paul says that they are to serve them even better because of their common faith and the fact that, by virtue of being believers, their masters are dear to them. Paul also tells Timothy that such an erroneous attitude towards work and service by believers would cause God's name and their teaching to be defamed. Paul concludes by urging Timothy to pass on those teachings to the church (1 Tim 6:2). These teachings contrast with the destructive teaching that godliness is a source of financial gain. Timothy is commanded to avoid the false teachings. Timothy is to guard that which has been committed to him and to stay away from false knowledge that is also godless (1 Tim 6:20–21).

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 6:3–5

Greek Text: 1 Timothy 6:3-5 (UBS Greek New Testament, 5th edition)

3 εἴ τις ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖ καὶ μὴ προσέρχεται ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις, τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ τῆ κατ' εὐσέβειαν διδασκαλίᾳ, 4 τετύφωται, μηδὲν ἐπιστάμενος, ἀλλὰ νοσῶν περὶ ζητήσεις καὶ λογομαχίας, ἐξ ὧν γίνεται φθόνος, ἔρις, βλασφημίας, ὑπόνοιαι πονηραί, 5 διαπατραριβαὶ διεφθαρμένων ἀνθρώπων τὸν νοῦν καὶ ἀπεστερημένων τῆς ἀληθείας, νομιζόντων πορισμὸν εἶναι τὴν εὐσέβειαν.¹¹

Translation

3 If anyone teaches differently and does not agree to the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching according to godliness, 4 he is conceited, understanding nothing, but he has an

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 613.

¹¹ Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament, 5th rev. ed.* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), 699-670.



unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, 5 constant friction between men of depraved mind, having been robbed of the truth, who think that godliness is a means of gain.

The Nature of False Teaching (vv. 3–4)

In verse 3 and part of verse 4, Paul writes, εἴ τις ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖ καὶ μὴ προσέρχεται ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ τῇ κατ’ εὐσέβειαν διδασκαλίᾳ, τετύφωται, μηδὲν ἐπιστάμενος (If anyone teaches differently and does not agree to the sound words those of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching according to godliness, he is conceited, understanding nothing). Verse 3 and part of verse 4 can be described as a first-class condition statement because it contains an “if clause” and the words ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖ and προσέρχεται, which are in the indicative mood. The first-class condition shows the certainty of Paul’s statement; it highlights that the teaching of a different doctrine is a reality. Fee also notes that verses 3–5 are a conditional sentence representing the actual state of affairs, with verse 3 describing what the false teachers were not doing and verses 4–5 describing the results.¹²

The word ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖ is derived from the word ἑτεροδιδασκαλέω, which is a phrase composed of two words, ἕτερος and διδασκαλία. The word ἕτερος refers to being distinct from another mentioned or implied thing.¹³ The word διδασκαλία refers to the act of teaching or giving instruction.¹⁴ The word ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖ, which is a verb in the present indicative active form, can be rendered as teaching differently. It is a declarative indicative that denotes a continuous present action. It can also be understood as teaching what is contrary to standard instruction.¹⁵ The present tense of the verb ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖ has a wide range of functional forms, including the customary, iterative, and static. In this context, its form is static because it not only shows continuous action but also the state of things regarding the handling of doctrine by the false teachers. This can be understood to mean that such a person is presently and continuously teaching a doctrine that is different from true instruction. Collins made a similar observation and argued that the false teacher not only teaches something different but also does so actively.¹⁶ In 1 Timothy 6:3, the false teacher

¹² Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1988), 140-141.

¹³ Fredrick William Danker, editor of Walter Bauer’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 352.

¹⁴ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 213.

¹⁵ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 351.

¹⁶ Raymond F. Collins, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2002), 155.



is described as one teaching a doctrine that differs from the standard or true doctrine. In this context, the true doctrine that is deviated from consists of the teaching advanced by Paul and his associates, including Timothy (2 Tim 2:25; 4:14).

The word προσέρχεται has προσέρχομαι as its root, which could mean ‘to move towards something’ or ‘to apply oneself to something.’ In the context of 1 Timothy 6:3, it means to ‘assent to’ or ‘agree to.’¹⁷ The false teacher’s failure to concur with the sound teaching that advances godliness was a present reality. Oden argues that the passage highlights the root idea of heresy: teaching that differs from the received tradition.¹⁸

The verb ὑγιαίνουνσιν is in the present participle, active, dative plural, masculine form. Its root word is ὑγιαίνω, whose range of meaning includes ‘being in good physical health’ and ‘being sound, being correct or free from error.’ In the context of 1 Timothy, it means ‘being sound.’¹⁹ The word ὑγιαίνουνσιν, which is in plural, is an attributive participle because it modifies the noun λόγοις (words). This is evidenced by the fact that ὑγιαίνουνσιν agrees with λόγοις in case, gender, and number. It can therefore be understood to mean that the words (λόγοις) are sound, correct, or free of error. The clause μὴ προσέρχεται ὑγιαίνουνσιν λόγοις τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ can therefore be translated as, “he does not agree to the sound words those of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The sound words constitute the teaching according to godliness.

The noun διδασκαλία, which is a dative of association in this context, refers to doctrine or that which is taught. The dative implies an association between διδασκαλία(teaching) and εὐσέβειαν (godliness). The phrase τῇ κατ’ εὐσέβειαν διδασκαλία could therefore be translated as “the teaching according to godliness.” The word κατ’ modifies the noun διδασκαλία(teaching) by telling us what it aims at or what its goal is. The goal of the διδασκαλία(teaching) described in verse 3 is εὐσέβειαν(godliness). Further, the phrase τῇ κατ’ εὐσέβειαν διδασκαλία (the teaching according to godliness) can also be understood to mean the teaching that leads to or produces godliness. Shuetze considers the teaching that false teachers fail to agree with in verse 3 to represent “godly teaching” that leads to true godliness.²⁰ Kostenberger, while reflecting on verse

¹⁷ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Hendrickson, 1889), 545.

¹⁸ Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (US: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 82.

¹⁹ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 910.

²⁰ Armin W. Schuetze, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 91.



3, argues that sound teaching and godly living are inseparable.²¹ Barclay also points out that sound doctrine promotes godliness in life and conduct, and argues for the inseparability of theology and ethics.²² The outcome of receiving such teaching would be that a person lives a godly life. In addition, the word διδασκαλία (teaching) is a noun in the dative feminine singular case and is closely related to λόγοις (words), which is a noun in the dative masculine plural case. The dative in this case is one of association. This could be interpreted to mean that the λόγοις (words) are what constitute the διδασκαλία (teaching). Verse 3 can be understood to mean that the false teacher teaches a different doctrine, one that is incorrect compared to the correct doctrine that leads to godliness. The concept of Jesus' sound words leading to godliness is similar to the idea that godliness is the end result of knowing the truth (Titus 1:1).

The clauses τις ἕτεροδιδασκαλεῖ (anyone teaches differently) and “μὴ προσέρχεται ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις, τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ τῇ κατ’ εὐσέβειαν διδασκαλίᾳ” (he does not agree to the sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ and the doctrine according to godliness) are joined by the coordinating conjunction καὶ (and), which appears twice in Verse 3. The first καὶ (and) joins ἕτεροδιδασκαλεῖ (teaches differently) with μὴ προσέρχεται ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (does not agree to the sound words those of our Lord Jesus Christ), showing that the two actions are similar. Knight makes a similar observation: by advancing another teaching, the false teachers are inherently in disagreement with the doctrine of godliness.²³ To teach differently is to deviate from sound doctrine. Oden advanced a similar argument that by advancing an alternative message, the false teachers had departed from the sound doctrine concerning Jesus Christ.²⁴ Hughes and Chapel considered the false teacher's teaching of a different message to be an act of minimizing and marginalizing Christ.²⁵ Barclay posits that those who departed from the apostolic teaching were contradicting the teaching of Christ himself.²⁶ The second καὶ (and) joins together ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (sound words those of our Lord Jesus Christ) with τῇ κατ’ εὐσέβειαν διδασκαλίᾳ (the teaching tending

²¹ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation: Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2017), 145.

²² William B. Barclay, *1 & 2 Timothy* (Webster, New York: Evangelical Press, 2000), 184.

²³ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: 'The New International Greek Testament Commentary NIGTC* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 396.

²⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, 81.

²⁵ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1–2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 185.

²⁶ William B. Barclay, *1 & 2 Timothy*, 184.



towards godliness), implying that “sound words” is the same as “the doctrine according to godliness.”

A key consideration to enable better understanding of the text’s meaning is a determination of what Paul meant by ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις, τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ), is the genitive one of origin or qualitative? Is he referring to Jesus’ actual words or something else? Scholars have articulated different views on their understanding of ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ). Oden argues that Paul believed the actual words of Jesus were preserved in oral tradition.²⁷ Oden’s view aligns with the Bible’s account of Paul’s ministry (1 Tim. 1:10–11; Gal 1:1, 12). Paul here implies being a direct recipient of the gospel from Jesus Christ.

Other scholars consider the genitive to be qualitative. Among them is Mounce, who holds a different position from Oden, who argued that ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις represents Jesus’ exact words. Mounce argues that Paul refers to words concerning Christ. He says that verse 3 refers to both the content and the effects of the proclamation.²⁸ Several scriptures support this view; Timothy was to maintain what he had received as a model of sound doctrine (2 Tim 1:13), and he was to commit it to reliable individuals who would then instruct others (2 Tim. 2:2). According to Stott, there is a third option whereby Paul considers his words to be those of Jesus.²⁹ Some scholars have advanced what can be considered the fourth view of the genitive, acknowledging that the breadth of Scripture encompasses two of the most prominent interpretations of ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Knight argues that the sound words of Jesus could be conveyed either directly (from Jesus) or indirectly (through the apostles and teachers).³⁰ Ngewa also agrees with Knight’s view. He claims that Jesus is both the origin and substance of the gospel.³¹

Considering the Pastoral Epistles’ context, the genitive in verse 3 is qualitative, and the most appropriate understanding of ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῖς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is “the sound words about Jesus Christ.” This is because the Pastoral letters depict the false teaching to be one that is opposed to the teaching advanced by Paul and his associates, including Timothy (1 Tim 6:1; 2 Tim 2:25; 4:14 and Titus 2:10). Paul in 2 Timothy 1:13 implored Timothy to preserve

²⁷ Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, 81.

²⁸ William D. Mounce, *World Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 960.

²⁹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 119.

³⁰ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 343.

³¹ Samuel Ngewa, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 149.



the sound teaching he had received from him. Further, Timothy was to pass on sound teaching to other people (2 Tim 2:2). One of the qualifications of an elder according to Paul's letter to Titus was the ability to preserve the message as it had been taught so that he could offer encouragement through sound teaching and also disprove any opposition to it (Titus 1:9). This underscores the fact that sound doctrine doesn't just consist of the actual words of Jesus Christ but also consists of teaching that conforms to the gospel and that is passed on from one person to another, in this case from Paul to Timothy and others.

It is also worth noting that sound doctrine is not restricted to Paul's writings but also includes those of the other apostles. Apostle Peter refers to Paul's message as captured in his writings and categorizes them alongside the other scriptures (2 Peter 3:15–16). This has been elaborated by Bruce, who indicates that the canon of Scripture, that which is to be taken as authoritative, can be traced back to the apostles' teaching. He posits that the word 'canon' had initially been used to denote the rule of faith, which summarized the Christian teaching as had been relayed by the apostles and against which any doctrine would be measured.³² These verses highlight several facts about sound doctrine. First, sound doctrine conforms to the gospel. Second, this gospel that sound doctrine conforms to originates from the message about Jesus Christ and his saving work. Third, sound doctrine is not restricted to the exact words of Jesus; it also consists of a pattern of teaching relayed to others by the apostles, yet it must conform to the message about Christ.

The text underscores that godliness is founded on sound doctrine, which is therefore essential for advancing in godliness. The value of sound doctrine is seen in Paul's command to Titus that he teach what is in line with sound teaching (Titus 2:1). doctrine and manner of living are closely interlinked and extremely important as illustrated by the urge to Timothy by Paul that he watches his life and teaching closely, and that he perseveres in them for by doing so he would save himself and his hearers (1 Tim 4:16). This implies that sound doctrine, which leads to godly conduct, needs to be preserved in the midst of false teachings. The false teacher and his hearers miss out on the opportunity to become godly. False teaching, therefore, has adverse spiritual effects on both its propagators and recipients.

³² Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2025), 18.



The Effects of False Teaching (1 Tim 6:4–5)

In verse 4, Paul instructs that the person who teaches differently and fails to agree to sound doctrine is τετύφωται (conceited). The word τετύφωται is a verb in the perfect indicative passive form. The perfect tense, whose shade is intensive, implies that the false teacher is receiving the action or the results of teaching differently. This further highlights the state of the false teacher, which is reflected in their actions. The word τετύφωται, whose root word is τυφώω, may be understood to mean that such a person is made blind with pride or conceit.³³ The same word τετύφωται is also used in 1 Timothy 3:6, where Paul instructs Timothy that he shouldn't appoint a recent convert as an overseer because such a person would become conceited and face similar judgment as the devil. The false teacher who teaches a different doctrine is conceited and is at great risk of judgment. This is because, like the devil, pride blinds him, hindering him from agreeing to the sound words that lead to godliness. Barclay views them as arrogantly elevating their opinion above the truth of God's Word.³⁴ Ngewa concurs with Barclay, noting that the false teachers have too high an opinion of themselves, which makes them bloated with self-importance.³⁵ Stott observes that people can respond to God's word in two ways: either with humility and trembling, or by hardening their hearts, stiffening their necks, and rejecting it.³⁶ The false teachers appear to have chosen the latter.

The word ἐπιστάμενος, a present participle in the middle voice, is derived from ἐπίσταμαι. The word ἐπίσταμαι could mean either of two things: to gain a firm mental grasp of something, or to understand; the second possible meaning is the acquisition of information about something or being acquainted with something. In the context of 1 Timothy 6:4, ἐπίσταμαι can be translated as "understand," and ἐπιστάμενος, in the present participle middle form, can therefore be translated as "understanding." This is because the tense is present continuous, which portrays the present state of the one teaching a different doctrine; it is not merely a past action. The phrase μηδὲν ἐπιστάμενος can therefore be translated as "understanding nothing." The word ἐπιστάμενος is a supplementary participle that completes the idea of the main verb τετύφωται. This agrees with Guthrie's observation that the false teacher is abysmally ignorant.³⁷ Fee agrees with Guthrie that the abandonment of truth by false teachers leads them to think they are wise or knowledgeable,

³³ Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 633.

³⁴ William B. Barclay, *1 & 2 Timothy*, 185.

³⁵ Samuel Ngewa, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, 149.

³⁶ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 138.

³⁷ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 136.



resulting in some level of self-importance, while, in fact, they understand nothing.³⁸ Schuetze observes that, by following their own ideas, the false teachers become conceited, display their ignorance by failing to pay attention to Jesus' words, and instead place themselves above Holy Scripture.³⁹ Similarly, Lea and Griffin argue that a departure from gospel truth leads to a lack of spiritual understanding.⁴⁰

In verse 4, the word ἀλλά, translated as “but,” is an adversative coordinating conjunction that indicates a contrast with what precedes. The word ἀλλά (but) implies that, despite such a person lacking understanding, they get involved in controversies and disputes concerning words. The false teacher's conceit stems from their unhealthy preoccupation with controversial questions and disputes over words, despite their lack of understanding. The word νοσῶν (having an unhealthy interest) has νόσος as its root word, which means disease or illness.⁴¹ Paul uses this word to characterize the person teaching a different doctrine as sick or ill. The idea of false teachers having some form of illness can be related to their failure to agree to the ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (the sound words those of our Lord Jesus Christ), which can also be understood as the healthy words of Jesus Christ. This state of illness is what gives rise to his unhealthy interest in controversies. These controversies are the source of φθόνος (envy), ἔρις (strife), βλασφημίαι (malicious talk), ὑπόνοιαι πονηραί (evil suspicions), διαπαρατριβαὶ διεφθαρμένων ἀνθρώπων τὸν νοῦν καὶ ἀπεστερημένων τῆς ἀληθείας (constant friction between men of depraved mind and having been robbed of the truth). Guthrie, while commenting on verse 4, highlights that intellectual wrangling often leads to spiritual decay.⁴²

The deviation from sound doctrine by the false teachers, and their preoccupation with controversial questions and disputes over words, lead to ungodly conduct, highlighted by the five vices: envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant disagreements or conflicts. Towner observes that slander or malicious talk is also denounced in other scriptures as a vice that is not supposed to be found among Christians. Towner further notes that Verbal attacks were apparently

³⁸ Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 141.

³⁹ Armin W. Schuetze, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 91.

⁴⁰ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus in New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992), 193.

⁴¹ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 602.

⁴² Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 136.



typical of the arguments associated with heresy.⁴³ Paul instructed Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:23–24 not to get involved in foolish arguments, as they lead to quarrels. Paul further reminded Timothy that the servant of the Lord wasn't supposed to engage in quarrels but to show kindness, teach, and not harbor resentment. This implies that the false teacher, obsessed with controversies and disputes over words, doesn't meet the standard expected of the Lord's servant.

This can also be understood to mean that an unhealthy interest in controversies leads to various forms of ungodliness, in contrast to the outcome of sound doctrine: godliness. This idea is also repeated in 2 Timothy 3:15–16, where Timothy was urged to handle the scriptures correctly and to avoid godless talk as it increases ungodliness. Kostenberger considers Paul to be highlighting the negative effects and practical outworking of false teaching on people's faith. False teaching leads people to be sidetracked rather than to focus on growing in Christian character after accepting the gospel.⁴⁴ Hughes and Chapell consider the false teachers' craving for controversy and word battles to be a sign of spiritual sickness; they also observe that apostasy is usually associated with oppositional perversity.⁴⁵ False teaching, being an antithesis of sound doctrine, leads to the false teachers being ignorant and conceited. Their unhealthy controversies and disputes over words that lead to ungodly behavior reflect their state of neglect of sound doctrine. Paul refers to Jesus' words as ὑγιής, "being sound," which also denotes "healthy" words; the opposite of sound or healthy words leads to obsessive involvement in quarrels and disputes over words, which generates ungodly conduct. Kostenberger considers the vices in verses 4-5 to be a dangerous combination that eats away at the congregation's spiritual life.⁴⁶ False teachings can therefore be said to be unhealthy because they lead to ungodly conduct.

In verse 5, Paul says διαπαρατριβαὶ διεφθαρμένων ἀνθρώπων τὸν νοῦν καὶ ἀπεστερημένων τῆς ἀληθείας, νομιζόντων πορισμὸν εἶναι τὴν εὐσέβειαν (constant friction between men of depraved mind and having been robbed of the truth, who think that godliness is a means of gain). This is a continuation of the results of the false teacher's unhealthy preoccupation with controversies and failure to agree with sound teaching. The word διαπαρατριβαὶ can also be

⁴³ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus: New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 433.

⁴⁴ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, 146.

⁴⁵ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1-2 Timothy and Titus*, 186.

⁴⁶ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, 147.



understood as constant argumentativeness and, by extension, as irritating, wrangling.⁴⁷ This can imply that false teachers are involved in constant wrangles or frictions, not mere occasional disagreements. The unhealthy interest in controversies leads to disharmony and disunity. Stott, while reflecting on the effects of false teaching, argues that the twisting of minds leads to the twisting of relationships.⁴⁸ It not only affects the relationships of those involved due to the vices it generates, but also hinders unity among them. Collins makes a similar observation: verbal warfare leaves the community in total disarray, with members pitted against each other.⁴⁹ Guthrie traces the constant friction to the depravity of minds, since in such a state, people are inclined to think the worst of one another.⁵⁰

The noun ἀνθρώπων is in the genitive masculine plural form, which can be translated as ‘between men’. Genitives have different functions, such as origin, possession, and relationship, among others. The noun ἀνθρώπων is a genitive of possession, indicating that these false teachers possess the vices listed in verse four and the constant friction at the beginning of verse 5 due to their failure to agree with sound doctrine, which leads to godliness, and their unhealthy interest in controversies. Knight also makes an important observation: the list of vices appears to have an intentional pattern that points to a close relationship between inward thoughts and attitudes and outward expression in words and actions.⁵¹ The word διεφθαρμένων (who are depraved) has διαφθείρω as its root, which in this context means to change for the worse or to corrupt minds or morals. The word διεφθαρμένων (who are depraved) in verse 5 is a verb whose form is a perfect passive participle, which indicates the state of being of the people who participate in the ungodliness due to failure to concur with the message about Jesus, and their unhealthy interest in controversies, they are of a depraved mind. Fee notes that the second outcome of the false teacher’s sickness is the corruption of their minds. He considers the culmination of their state of sickness due to departure from sound doctrine to be decay and the corrupting of the mind.⁵²

The word ἀπεστερημένων is a verb in the perfect passive participle form. The root word for ἀπεστερημένων is ἀποστερέω, which can be understood to mean causing one to suffer loss by

⁴⁷ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 208.

⁴⁸ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 139.

⁴⁹ Raymond F. Collins *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: a commentary* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2002), 156.

⁵⁰ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 136-137.

⁵¹ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 398-399.

⁵² Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1988), 142.



robbing or defrauding.⁵³ The word ἀπεστερημένων can therefore be translated as “having been robbed.” This implies that those who don’t agree with sound doctrine and who have an unhealthy interest in controversies are said to be robbed of the truth. Towner makes a similar argument by associating the false teacher’s corruption of the mind with their resistance to the truth.⁵⁴ Lea and Griffin argue that a key characteristic of the false teachers who engage in constant quarrels is mental corruption and a lack of truth.⁵⁵

The phrase τῆς ἀληθείας (the truth) in this context refers to ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις (sound words), as indicated in verse 3. This is because ὑγιαίνουσιν λόγοις can also be understood to mean true or correct words. The concept of Paul and his associates’ teachings being referred to as the truth is highlighted in other scriptures. Paul refers to the Scriptures as the word of Truth (2 Tim 2:15). Indulgence in godless chatter leads to more ungodliness and to a departure from the truth (2 Tim. 2:16–18). Timothy is urged to gently teach those who oppose him with the hope that they would repent and know the truth (2 Tim 2:24–25). In 2 Tim 4:3–4, Paul equates the rejection of sound doctrine to turning away from the truth. Because they do not heed the sound and correct words, they don’t have the truth, and since they do not adhere to the sound doctrine that produces godliness, they continue in a state of depravity. This underscores the negative effect of neglecting sound doctrine and how it leads to ungodliness rather than godliness.

The verb νομιζόντων is in the present active participle form. Its root word is νομίζω, which in this context means to deem or to think.⁵⁶ The word εὐσέβειαν, whose root word is εὐσέβεια, denotes piety towards God. The word εὐσέβειαν can therefore be translated as godliness. The word πορισμὸν, whose root word is πορισμός, means “of gain.”⁵⁷ Further, in the phrase, νομιζόντων πορισμὸν εἶναι τὴν εὐσέβειαν, Paul describes the reasoning that godliness should be a source of gain as the outcome of having been robbed of the truth. Barclay points out that in verse 5, Paul reveals that selfish gain is what motivates the false teachers; they mask their greed by pretending they’re working towards their hearers’ good.⁵⁸ Kostenberger agrees with Barclay that, because of the false teacher’s lack of truth, their religion became a means of selfish gain.⁵⁹ Schuetze considers

⁵³ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 106.

⁵⁴ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 433.

⁵⁵ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus in New American Commentary*, 194.

⁵⁶ Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 427.

⁵⁷ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 757.

⁵⁸ William B. Barclay, *1 & 2 Timothy*, 187.

⁵⁹ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, 148.



false teaching as being prone to the use of its false “godliness” as “a means to financial gain. He further argues that the greed of the human heart is unable to resist the use of “godliness” for gain.⁶⁰

It is important to understand what kind of gain Paul is referring to in 1 Timothy 6:5. The immediate context and the Pastoral epistles shed light on what type of gain he meant by the word πορισμὸν (means of gain). In verse 9, Paul highlights the danger of seeking wealth. Further, in verse 10, Paul cautions against loving money because it is the source of all types of evil. Additionally, overseers and deacons are not supposed to be caught up in the love for money or to pursue deceitful gain (1 Tim 3:3,8; and Titus 1:7), those who don’t possess true godliness are said to be lovers of money (2 Tim 3: 2). Considering the immediate context and the other Pastoral epistles, the word πορισμὸν as used in 1 Timothy 6:5 can also be understood to mean “means of financial gain”. The false teacher, having been robbed of the truth, has been corrupted in his thinking, leading him to wrongly think that being godly should bring about financial gain (1 Tim 6:5).

Other scholars have also highlighted their understanding of verse 5. Fee notes that the false teachers were motivated by financial gain and were teaching to earn people’s favor and subsequently get money from them.⁶¹ Hughes and Chapel highlight their understanding of godliness, demonstrating the effect of the false teachers’ depravity. Further, they point out that the false teachers were in it to earn a living and had begun fleecing the people.⁶² Guthrie, while reflecting on the false teachers’ attitude in verse 5, posits that true godliness shouldn’t be commercialized because it is a matter of the heart, not the pocket.⁶³ Ngewa also comments that the main issue with the false teachers was their motive; they used the ministry for personal benefits.⁶⁴

False teaching, through the five vices, namely, envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of corrupt mind that demonstrate ungodly conduct, can also be understood to be a threat to human relationships and also the unity within the fellowship because they cause disharmony. False teaching can also be seen as a disease that eventually spreads from the false teacher and ruins the body, in this case, the church. False doctrine, due to its unhealthy

⁶⁰ Armin W. Schuetze, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 92.

⁶¹ Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 142.

⁶²R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, 169.

⁶³ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 137.

⁶⁴ Samuel Ngewa, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, 151.



nature, breeds moral corruption, disunity, disharmony, mental corruption, and a lack of truth. This leads to wrong thinking, in this case, about godliness being a means of financial gain.

Application

African Christianity is on an upward trend and is projected to increase to 1.25 billion by 2050.⁶⁵ A key challenge the church faces today is the rise of false doctrines that have been normalized and, in some cases, institutionalized. One of the most prevalent false teachings is the prosperity teaching. The Lausanne working group defined the prosperity gospel as “the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the ‘sowing of seeds’ through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings.”⁶⁶

At the heart of the prosperity teaching is a complete shift from the true gospel and a misunderstanding of the scriptures. Fee argues that the teaching is not biblical, and its main problem is hermeneutical.⁶⁷ A similar observation is made by Jones and Woodbridge, who point out that prosperity teaching omits key components of the true gospel, including Jesus, the sinfulness of humanity, the cross, and God’s judgment against sin. Without these, they argue, there is no gospel.⁶⁸ Barron also argues that these preachers swindle their followers and that their teaching focuses more on their own success rather than on messages grounded in biblical exegesis.⁶⁹

Maura *et al.* observe that the prosperity gospel is deeply entrenched in Africa and that it needs to be taken seriously because of its implications.⁷⁰ Modern-day prosperity teachers, like the false teacher depicted in 1 Timothy 6:3–5, are corrupted in their thinking and reason that being godly should lead to financial gain. Adamo reflects on this corrupt thinking among one of Nigeria’s most prominent prosperity teachers. He points out that Oyedepo views salvation as a way of

⁶⁵Isaac Deji Ayegboyin and Michael Adeleke Ogunewu, *The Advent, Development, and Impact of Christianity in Africa* (The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Africa, 2022), 118.

⁶⁶Lausanne Movement (Africa Chapter), “*Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel*,” ERT 34 (2010): 99.

⁶⁷Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health & Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver: Regent College Pub., 2006), 5.

⁶⁸David Wayne Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017), 31.

⁶⁹Joshua Robert Barron, “Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel? An Examination of the Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity,” *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 33, no. 1 (2022): 95.

⁷⁰Michael Otieno Maura, John Piper, and Wayne A. Grudem, *Prosperity?: Seeking the True Gospel* (S.l.: Africa Christian Textbooks Registered Trustees, 2015), 2.



acquiring wealth or delivering people from poverty.⁷¹ The error of the prosperity teaching in Africa is like that of the false teacher in 1 Timothy 6:5, who thinks that being godly should bring about financial gain. The prosperity gospel teachers focus more on acquiring riches and set their minds on it. Alwala points out that prosperity teaching holds that prosperity depends on sufficient faith. He further reports that a significant percentage of Christians in Nigeria (96%), Kenya (83%), and South Africa (80%) believe that having a strong faith would attract material blessings from God.⁷²

Haustein's comment on Prophet Shepherd Bushiri exposes the harm and destructive nature of the prosperity gospel, and how a deviation from sound doctrine and a love of money leads to moral corruption among its propagators. Haustein highlights the case of the Malawian Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, who had to flee his country alongside his wife after failing to meet bail conditions in his fraud trial and fearing arrest. Bushiri is said to have a controversial miracle ministry and has been accused of being involved in dishonest business dealings.⁷³

The prosperity gospel, rather than promoting godliness with contentment, promotes covetousness and greed among its proponents and adherents. It teaches people to accumulate. Williams, while reflecting on the role of prosperity teaching in fostering greed, posits that, at its core, it is the idea of sowing seeds to get more.⁷⁴ Whereas prosperity teachers advance this false teaching to get richer from the generous giving of their followers, the adherents of the prosperity teachings pursue blessings in the form of financial prosperity by virtue of being Christian and "planting a seed" that will unlock it. Both the teachers and their adherents are caught up in a web of greed that keeps them away from sound doctrine that promotes godliness. Many of those who claim to be believers and follow these teachers wouldn't submit to faithful biblical preaching that would build up their faith. They prefer more "exciting", "uplifting", and "encouraging" sermons that promise them financial freedom and prosperity. Because they adhere to these teachings and are averse to sound doctrine, they lack spiritual maturity and fail to acknowledge the place of true Christian discipleship. The prosperity gospel increases their covetousness and hunger for worldly

⁷¹ David T. Adamo, "The African Background of the Prosperity Gospel," *Theologia Viatorum* 45, no. 1 (2021): 3.

⁷² Bernard Alwala, "The Fate of Prosperity Gospel in Kenya," *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 2, no. 1 (2020): 18.

⁷³ Jörg Haustein, "What is Happening to Christianity? Insights from Africa" *Religion and Society in the 21st Century* (2022):1-8

⁷⁴ Glyn Williams, *The Prosperity Gospel's Effect in Missions: An African Perspective* Sandton: South African Theological Seminary (2017),14.



riches but leaves them spiritually bankrupt. This has led to what has been termed “nominal Christianity” among many who associate with the Christian faith.

Conclusion

The passage in 1 Timothy 6:3–5 explains the nature and effects of false teachings. The passage reveals that doctrine affects conduct. This passage underscores the fact that the origin of sound doctrine is the message about the Lord Jesus Christ. It emphasizes that sound doctrine leads to true godliness, not merely a “form of godliness.” The text also reveals that false teaching ruins human relationships and brings disunity. The passage further shows that a deviation from sound doctrine leads to a state of depravity and robs people of the truth, leading to the erroneous belief that being godly should lead to financial gain. The deviation from sound doctrine and its effects are illustrated by the prosperity teaching, which is prevalent in Africa and elsewhere. There is a need to train pastors in the handling of the Scriptures to ensure they correctly interpret and faithfully preach the entirety of the message of Scripture. Vibrant pastors’ fellowships for accountability and promotion of faithfulness in doctrine and conduct are recommended. Christians need to invest more time in Bible study to gain a better understanding of the scriptures, avoid being victims of false teachings, and develop a biblical view of life, especially on how to handle wealth.

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