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Article

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A CONTEXTUALIZATION OF 1 TIMOTHY 4:7-10 ON THE PHARMACOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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Abstract

This study reinterprets 1 Timothy 4:7-10 through a novel pharmacological metaphor, presenting spiritual formation as a therapeutic regimen for cultivating godliness (eusebeia) in the context of first-century Ephesus. Moving beyond the traditional athletic metaphor, the paper posits that the passage prescribes sound doctrine as a medicinal "active ingredient" and disciplined training (gymnazo^ν) with strenuous effort (ago^ν nizomai) as the regimen for its administration, countering the spiritually toxic "doctrines of demons." A tripartite methodology - historical-critical, metaphorical-theological, and exegetical - grounds the analysis. The historical-critical approach situates the text within Ephesus's socio-religious milieu, marked by syncretism and heresy, while examining debates on Pauline authorship. The metaphorical-theological framework reappropriates pharmacology, shifting from negative connotations of pharmakeia (sorcery) to therapeia (healing), to model spiritual transformation. Exegetical analysis unpacks the Greek text, highlighting the prescription's components: rejecting myths, training in godliness, and striving toward holistic spiritual health. The resulting pharmacological model of sanctification emphasizes active, grace-empowered participation, contrasting with Wesleyan, Reformed, and Keswick models by framing spiritual growth as a dynamic, lifelong regimen. This approach illuminates the passage's call for intentional discipline in the midst of modern spiritual challenges, offering a robust framework for fostering godliness in contemporary Christian practice. The study

underscores the enduring relevance of 1 Timothy's prescription for spiritual vitality, promising benefits for both present and eternal life.

Keywords: Contextualization, Spiritual, Growth, Pharmacology, and 1 Timothy 4:7-10.

Introduction

The pericope of 1 Timothy 4:7-10 stands as a main exhortation within the Pastoral Letters, providing a potent and concise strategy for spiritual strength. Traditionally interpreted through an athletic metaphor, its call to "train" in godliness evokes images of the gymnasium and the disciplined life of an athlete. While this framework is textually sound and theologically productive, it does not exhaust the passage's metaphorical richness or its practical and therapeutic implications. This paper argues that 1 Timothy 4:7-10, when interpreted through a pharmacological metaphor, presents a sophisticated therapeutic regimen for spiritual formation. This regimen prescribes disciplined training (*gymnazo*) in godliness (*eusebeia*) as the primary "medication" and strenuous effort (*agonizomai*) as the necessary "adherence," functioning as a potent antidote to the spiritually toxic "doctrines of demons" circulating in first-century Ephesus. This hermeneutical approach moves beyond traditional athletic metaphors to frame spiritual growth as a process of holistic, therapeutic intervention aimed at cultivating spiritual health. By viewing sound doctrine as a prescribed "medicine" and spiritual disciplines as the "regimen" for its administration, this framework illuminates the passage's urgent concern not only with correct belief but with the practical, embodied process of cultivating a healthy spiritual constitution capable of resisting the pathogenic impact of heresy.

Spiritual Formation and Growth

Within contemporary evangelical theology, "spiritual formation" has become the preferred term to describe the process of Christian maturation. Dallas Willard offers a foundational definition, describing it as "the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself" (Willard, 2002, p. 22). This definition underscores that the process is initiated and empowered by the Holy Spirit, focuses on the transformation of the internal character, and has Christlikeness as its explicit aim. This process is not a passive state but an ongoing, dynamic journey of personal transformation, deepened faith, and an evolving relationship with God (Chad, 2025). The theological necessity for such formation is grounded in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Humanity, created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), saw that image "perverted" by the Fall (Hoekema, 1986). The work of Christ is therefore not only relational but restorative; He came to restore both humanity's relationship with God and the divine image within humanity. As a result, spiritual formation is the process by which believers, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, are progressively conformed to the image of Christ, who is the perfect reflection of God. This journey toward Christlikeness is not linear but is shaped by divine encounters, struggles with doubt, community support, and the intentional practice of spiritual disciplines (Teo, 2017). The ultimate goal is a holistic transformation that results in right relationships with God, self, and others, manifesting as a godly and transformed lifestyle.

Methodology

This paper employs a tripartite methodology. First, a historical-critical analysis establishes the socio-religious and theological context of the Ephesian church to which the letter is addressed. This involves examining the scholarly debate surrounding the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles and its hermeneutical implications, as well as diagnosing the specific

spiritual "malady" - the false teaching - that necessitated this pastoral prescription. Second, a metaphorical-theological analysis constructs and justifies the use of a pharmacological hermeneutic. This involves exploring the biblical concept of *pharmakeia* and reappropriating the broader field of pharmacology as a positive and therapeutic model for understanding the mechanics of spiritual transformation. Finally, a detailed linguistic and exegetical analysis of 1 Timothy 4:7-10 is conducted. This close reading of the Greek text serves to unfold the "prescription" itself, identifying its core components and mechanisms of action. The findings are synthesized into a coherent pharmacological model of sanctification, which are placed in dialogue with traditional Protestant models to highlight its unique contributions to the doctrine of spiritual growth.

The Ephesian Clinic: Contextualizing the Pastoral Prescription

A prescription is never written in a vacuum; it is a specific response to a particular patient's condition within a given environment. To understand the therapeutic logic of 1 Timothy 4:7-10, one must first enter the "clinic" of first-century Ephesus, assess the patient, and diagnose the illness. This requires an examination of the letter's origins, the socio-religious pressures on the Ephesian church, and the specific nature of the heresy that threatened its spiritual health. The identity of the "attending physician" - the author of 1 Timothy - has been a subject of intense scholarly debate since the nineteenth century. While the letter explicitly claims Pauline authorship (1 Tim. 1:1), a significant, and perhaps predominant, consensus among modern scholars views the Pastoral Epistles (PE) as pseudonymous, written in Paul's name by a later disciple (Aageson, 2020). Arguments for this position are cumulative, citing notable differences from the undisputed Pauline corpus in vocabulary, literary style, theological emphases, and historical details that are difficult to reconcile with the chronology of Paul's life presented in the book of Acts (Collins, 1988). Conversely, a robust defense of Pauline authorship continues, arguing that these discrepancies are not insurmountable (Carter, 2007). Proponents suggest that stylistic and lexical variations are attributable to factors such as Paul's advanced age, the unique subject matter, and the use of a different amanuensis, with some scholars proposing Luke as the likely scribe (Witherington, 2006).

The debate is not just a historical footnote; it determines the fundamental nature of the therapeutic intervention being prescribed. If the letter is understood as a direct communication from the apostle Paul to his apostolic delegate, Timothy, then the instructions in chapter 4 function as a personal, urgent "field prescription." It is a mentor's immediate response to an acute crisis threatening a specific community (Fee, 1988). In this scenario, the pharmacological metaphor is one of emergency medicine. However, if the letter is the work of a later Paulinist, its purpose shifts from immediate crisis management to the long-term institutionalization of Pauline tradition in a post-apostolic era. The text then becomes less of a personal letter and more of a "church manual" or a standardized "pharmacopeia," designed to ensure doctrinal stability for a church transitioning from a charismatic movement to an established institution (Aageson, 2020).

The Patient's Environment: The Socio-Religious Milieu of Ephesus

The church in Ephesus was situated in a complex and spiritually hazardous environment. As the capital of the Roman province of Asia, Ephesus was a large, cosmopolitan centre of trade, culture, and religion, with a population exceeding 250,000 (Portefaix, 1988). This multi-ethnic metropolis was characterized by great wealth, religious pluralism, and a climate of moral permissiveness. This environment promoted a syncretistic perspective where claims of

exclusive truth were viewed with suspicion, and social pressure against such claims was acute (Kubik, 2012). For the nascent Christian community, this presented a constant temptation to compromise its distinctive beliefs and practices. The spiritual atmosphere of the city was dominated by powerful and pervasive religious forces. The most prominent was the cult of Artemis (Diana in Latin), a fertility goddess whose magnificent temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and a major economic engine for the city (Portefaix, 1988). Alongside the Artemis cult, the imperial cult demanded civic worship of the emperor, who was often titled "Saviour" and "Lord," creating a direct conflict with Christian confession. The city was also home to the worship of numerous other deities, such as Aphrodite and Dionysus, contributing to an environment saturated with hedonistic pleasures and idolatry (Jackson, 2011). Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus had established a strong church, but he foresaw that this spiritually toxic environment would produce internal threats (Acts 20:29-30).

The specific malady addressed in 1 Timothy is a form of false teaching that the author attributes to demonic origins, "deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). The primary symptoms of this spiritual disease were a form of spiritually deceptive asceticism: its proponents forbade marriage and commanded abstinence from certain foods (1 Tim. 4:3). This asceticism was likely rooted in a dualistic worldview, possibly an incipient form of Gnosticism, which viewed the material world and the physical body as inherently evil and thus to be denied (Mowczko, 2013). This ascetic impulse was combined with an obsession with "myths and endless genealogies" (1 Tim. 1:4), which appear to be speculative and esoteric interpretations of the Mosaic Law, suggesting a syncretistic blend of Jewish and proto-Gnostic elements (Third Millennium Ministries, n.d.). The motivation of these teachers seems to have been a mixture of pride - a desire to be recognized as "teachers of the law" (1 Tim. 1:7) - and financial greed, viewing godliness as a means of profit (1 Tim. 6:5). Consequently, the prescription in 1 Timothy 4:7-10 is a highly specific therapeutic intervention. It is not a generic call to be spiritual but a carefully calibrated formula that rejects both the world's self-indulgence and the heretics' ungodly self-denial, championing a third way: a path of sanctified embodiment where God's good creation is to be received with thanksgiving (Fee, 1988).

A Framework for Theological Pharmacology

In order to fully understand the therapeutic precision of 1 Timothy 4:7-10, it is essential to establish a hermeneutical framework that can account for its language of intervention, training, and holistic health. While the athletic metaphor is a common and valid starting point, a pharmacological metaphor offers a more comprehensive model for understanding the dynamics of spiritual formation as a response to spiritual disease. This "theological pharmacology" provides a lens through which to analyze the interaction between doctrine (as a spiritual substance) and the believer's spiritual constitution. The term "pharmacology" derives from the Greek root *pharmak-*, which has a complex and often negative history in the New Testament. The noun *pharmakeia* appears in lists of the "works of the flesh" and is typically translated as "sorcery" or "witchcraft" (Gal. 5:20; Rev. 18:23). In the ancient world, the term referred broadly to the use of drugs, often in connection with pagan religious practices, idolatry and deception (Pretorius, 2023). The "doctrines of demons" circulating in Ephesus can thus be understood as a form of spiritual *pharmakeia* - a toxic concoction of lies that poisons the soul.

This paper proposes to reappropriate the concept of pharmacology, moving from the negative pole of *pharmakeia* (poison) to the positive pole of *therapeia* (healing). This

hermeneutical framework, which can be termed "theological pharmacology," examines the interaction of doctrines and spiritual practices (the "drugs") with the believer's ultimate values and spiritual health (Moraczewski, 1973). Both science and theology rely on metaphors and models to articulate complex, often unobservable realities (Barbour, 1974). Just as medicine uses metaphors of warfare to describe disease, theology can employ pharmacology as a heuristic model to understand the mechanics of spiritual transformation prescribed in Scripture.

Components of the Metaphor

A pharmacological model provides a structured vocabulary for analyzing the process of spiritual growth. The key components of this metaphor, as applied to 1 Timothy 4, are as follows:

- i. **The Prescription (The Active Ingredient):** The prescribed "medication" is sound doctrine, described as the "words of the faith and of the good doctrine" (4:6). This is the life-giving truth of the gospel, which nourishes the soul and promotes spiritual health.
- ii. **The Regimen (Adherence and Dosing):** The therapeutic regimen consists of the spiritual disciplines, especially the active "training" (*gymnazo*) and strenuous "striving" (*agonizomai*) mentioned in the text. This is the prescribed method for administering and metabolizing the "medicine" of truth.
- iii. **The Therapeutic Outcome (Efficacy):** The desired state of spiritual health is *eusebeia* (godliness). This is the evidence that the therapy is effective. It is a holistic condition of spiritual well-being, reverence toward God, and a life that reflects His character.
- iv. **Contraindications and Toxicology:** The "godless myths and old wives' tales" (4:7) are contraindicated substances. They are spiritually toxic, and their ingestion leads to adverse side effects, such as "controversial speculations" (1:4) and a "shipwreck" of faith (1:19).

Exegetical Analysis of 1 Timothy 4:7-10

A close reading of the Greek text of 1 Timothy 4:7-10 reveals the precise details of this spiritual-pharmacological prescription. The author moves from a command to avoid spiritual toxins to the core instruction for therapeutic training, followed by a cost-benefit analysis of the regimen and a concluding statement on the divine source of this healing. The verse opens with a sharp contrast, commanding a continuous and personal refusal (*paraitou*, *paraitou*) of "profane and old wives' myths" (*τους δε βεβηλους και γραωδεις μυθους*, *tous de bebēlous kai graōdeis muthous*). The myths are characterized as profane (*bebēlous*), that which is common and devoid of sacred character, and "old-womanish" (*graōdeis*), a term of contempt suggesting they are nonsensical tales (Hiebert, 1957). This prophylactic measure is immediately followed by the positive prescription: "but train yourself for godliness" (*γυμναζε δε σεαυτον προς ευσεβειαν*, *gymnaze de seauton pros eusebeian*). The verb *γυμναζε* (*gymnaze*) is a present active imperative, calling for continuous, diligent, and strenuous effort. It evokes the image of an athlete in a gymnasium, stripping away all encumbrances for rigorous training (Fee, 1988). The goal of this training is *ευσεβειαν* (*eusebeian*), "godliness," a key term in the Pastoral Epistles denoting a practical, lived-out piety - a God-centered orientation that shapes one's entire life.

Verse 8 provides the rationale for the demanding regimen, presenting a clear cost-benefit analysis. The author begins by acknowledging the limited utility of physical discipline: "for bodily training is of some value" (*η γαρ σωματικη γυμνασια προς oligon estin ophelimos*, *hē gar sōmatikē gymnasia pros oligon estin ophelimos*). This may carry a subtle critique of

the false teachers' ascetic practices, conceding that such discipline has some profit, but its benefit is limited to "a little while" or this transient life (Hiebert, 1957). In stark contrast, "godliness is of value for all things" (*ἡ δὲ εὐσέβεια πρὸς πάντα ὠφέλιμος ἐστίν, hē de eusebeia pros panta ōrphelimos estin*), because it "holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (*ἐπαγγελίαν ἔχουσα ζωῆς τῆς νῦν καὶ τῆς μελλούσης, eraggelian echousa zōēs tēs nyn kai tēs mellousēs*). The "medication" of godliness has both immediate and long-term therapeutic benefits, making it the ultimate spiritual and existential investment (Platt, 2019).

Verses 9 and 10 ground this complete therapeutic enterprise in the character and work of God. Verse 9 opens with a formula characteristic of the Pastoral Epistles: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance" (*πιστὸς ὁ λόγος καὶ πάσης ἀποδοχῆς ἄξιος, pistos ho logos kai pasēs apodochēs axios*), emphatically endorsing the preceding statement. Verse 10 then explains the motivation for the arduous work of ministry: "For to this end we toil and strive" (*εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ κοπιῶμεν καὶ ἀγωνιζόμεθα, eis touto gar kopiōmen kai agōnizometha*). The verb ἀγωνιζόμεθα (*agōnizometha*) depicts a grueling struggle, a fight against adversaries, or an athlete contending for a prize (Thayer's Greek Lexicon, n.d.). The ultimate foundation for this strenuous labour is hope in the "living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe" (*ὅτι ἠλπίκαμεν ἐπὶ θεῷ ζῶντι, ὃς ἐστίν σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, μάλιστα πιστῶν, hoti ēlpikamen epi theō zōnti, hos estin sōtēr pantōn anthrōpōn, malista pistōn*). This God is identified as the σωτὴρ (*sōtēr*), the Saviour or Healer, who provides the ultimate remedy. The scope of His saving work is universal, but its specific salvific efficacy is special to those who believe (Knight, 1992).

The Regimen of Spiritual Growth: A Therapeutic Process

The pharmacological model of sanctification is a multi-stage process. It begins with a diagnosis of the human condition, which is characterized by sin and a susceptibility to spiritually toxic ideas. In response, God, the Divine Physician, provides a prescription: the gospel of grace, which is encapsulated in "sound doctrine" (Berkhof, 1938). The believer's role is one of active adherence to this prescribed regimen. This involves both prophylaxis (rejecting "godless myths") and the therapeutic regimen itself: the strenuous, disciplined training (*gymnazo*) and striving (*ago nizomai*) in godliness. This is not a passive reception of grace but an active, grace-empowered participation in the healing process. The mechanism of action involves the Holy Spirit, who empowers the believer to metabolize the "medicine" of truth, leading to the internal transformation of character (Willard, 2002). The final therapeutic outcome is *eusebeia* - a state of holistic spiritual health that manifests in a life of reverence toward God.

Comparison with Traditional Models of Sanctification

Situating this pharmacological model in dialogue with other prominent Protestant views of sanctification highlights its unique contributions. While all orthodox models affirm that sanctification is a work of God's grace, they differ in their descriptions of the process, the role of human effort, and the expected outcome in this life. The following table contrasts the proposed Pharmacological Model with the Wesleyan, Reformed, and Keswick models to clarify its distinctives (Alexander, 1988; Naselli, 2010).

Feature	Wesleyan Model	Reformed Model	Keswick ("Higher Life") Model	Pharmacological Model (1 Timothy 4)
Core Metaphor	Attaining Perfection (in love)	Gradual Growth / Building	Entering a "Higher Life" / Rest	Therapeutic Regimen / Training for Health
Nature of Progress	Gradual, but with a potential crisis moment of "Entire Sanctification".	Lifelong, gradual, progressive, and incomplete in this life.	A decisive crisis of "surrender" leads to a new plateau of victorious living.	A continuous, strenuous training process with cumulative effects; health can fluctuate based on adherence and exposure to toxins.
Key Human Action	Faith and cooperation with grace, striving toward perfection.	Active pursuit of holiness through means of grace (Word, sacraments, prayer), mortification of sin.	Passive surrender and faith ("Let go and let God"); "trying" is counterproductive.	Active, disciplined, strenuous training (gymnazo ^ν) and striving (agonizomai); adherence to the prescribed regimen.
View of Sin	Post-sanctification sin is a voluntary transgression of a known law; freedom from the "bent to sinning" is possible.	Indwelling sin remains a reality throughout the believer's life; a constant battle between flesh and Spirit.	Distinguishes between the "carnal" and "spiritual" Christian; victory over known sin is the norm for the surrendered believer.	Spiritual "disease" (sin) and "toxins" (heresy) are constant threats requiring ongoing prophylactic and therapeutic intervention.
Role of Crisis	"Entire Sanctification" is a potential "second blessing" crisis.	Definitive sanctification occurs at conversion, but progress is non-crisis-oriented.	The crisis of full surrender is central to entering the "victorious life".	No single crisis is emphasized; rather, it is a daily, disciplined regimen. Crises may occur as acute spiritual "illnesses" requiring intervention.

The Pharmacological Model, as derived from 1 Timothy 4, offers a unique synthesis. Like the Reformed view, it posits a lifelong, strenuous process. However, its emphasis on *training* and

striving provides a more dynamic picture of the believer's role. Unlike the Keswick model, it does not advocate for passivity but for intense, grace-empowered effort. And in contrast to the Wesleyan model's potential for a single crisis of "entire sanctification," the pharmacological model suggests an ongoing regimen where spiritual health is maintained through daily discipline and vigilance.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that interpreting 1 Timothy 4:7-10 through a pharmacological hermeneutic provides a powerful and practical model for understanding spiritual formation. This approach recasts the pursuit of godliness as a comprehensive therapeutic regimen prescribed by the Divine Physician, God the Saviour. This regimen requires both a prophylactic rejection of spiritual toxins—the "profane myths" of false doctrine—and a disciplined adherence to a therapeutic course of action: the strenuous training (*gymnazo*) and striving (*ago nizomai*) in godliness. The "medicine" in this regimen is the life-giving truth of the gospel, and the desired outcome is a state of holistic spiritual health (*eusebeia*) that holds promise for both the present life and the life to come. The pharmacological model derived from 1 Timothy 4 offers a potent critique of several contemporary challenges to authentic spiritual discipline. The modern world, particularly in Western consumer cultures, presents a constant barrage of competing "prescriptions" for fulfillment. Digital technology and on-demand entertainment function as powerful spiritual "opiates" or "placebos," promising connection but often leading to distraction and spiritual malnourishment (Reinke, 2022). Adherence to the biblical regimen of disciplined training in godliness requires intentional, counter-cultural effort against these pervasive forces. This model also addresses perennial challenges within the church itself. It supplies a clear safeguard against the pitfall of legalism, which can "choke the heart and soul out of walking with God" (Foster, 1983). In the pharmacological framework, the disciplines are not virtuous in themselves; they are simply the prescribed means of administering the medicine of grace.

The prescription articulated in 1 Timothy 4:7-10 remains immensely relevant for the church in every age. It diagnoses the timeless human susceptibility to spiritual disease and prescribes an enduring remedy. It calls believers not to a life of passive waiting or anxious self-effort, but to a life of disciplined partnership with God. The church is to be a community of spiritual health, a place where believers are nourished on the "words of the faith" and diligently train together in the gymnasium of discipleship. The Christian life is a strenuous endeavour, a labour and a struggle fuelled by a confident hope in the living God, the ultimate Healer and Saviour. By rejecting the toxic myths of our age and embracing the therapeutic regimen of the gospel, the church can cultivate the robust godliness that is profitable for all things, holding the promise of true life, both now and forever.

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