

Introduction to 1 and 2 Timothy

During Ordinary Time 2022, Church of the Savior will be reading the First and Second Letters of Paul to Timothy. Together with Titus, these letters are often called the “Pastoral Epistles.” With Philemon, the Pastoral Epistles are the only Pauline letters addressed to an individual as opposed to a congregation. At the same time, they were written with the evident expectation that they would become known to wider communities – and today they are part of the New Testament, to be read and studied by every Christian congregation.

Like most of Paul’s other letters (with the possible exceptions of Romans and Galatians), 1 and 2 Timothy are written situationally rather than systematically. Their focus is much more practical than that of other Pauline epistles, however; and many of the specific questions they address persist today. Consequently, as we read week by week, we will focus particularly on how the passages speak to us in our current situation. This introduction is written to provide background material that we will not always have time to develop otherwise.

Who Was Timothy?

Timothy is actually a central figure in the New Testament. We first meet him in Acts 16, in Lystra, at the beginning of Paul’s second missionary journey. There we learn that Timothy’s mother was a believing Jew, his father a Gentile. Like Paul, Timothy likely had a Greek education in addition to his Jewish background. Paul immediately took Timothy with him, and there began a lifelong association.

Indeed, over time Timothy becomes the most important figure in Paul’s ministry. Besides being the recipient of these two letters, Timothy is linked with Paul in six of his eleven other letters, and mentioned in two more. Only in Galatians, Titus, and Ephesians (ironically, given that the Church in Ephesus is the focus of these two letters) is Timothy not mentioned. He also appears in Hebrews 13:23, where the writer tells us that Timothy has been “released” – which might refer to an imprisonment.

We might call Timothy Paul’s “troubleshooter.” These letters tell us he represented Paul in Ephesus – but at various times he performed the same function in Macedonia (Acts 18:5, 19:22), Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:20, Philippi (Philippians 2:19) and Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10-11, Romans 16:21).

But Timothy is more to Paul than simply a valued ministry colleague. Paul also holds him in deep affection, a circumstance that is evident both in Paul's other letters, and especially in these two. Paul's affection for Timothy comes through specifically, for instance, in his concern for Timothy's wellbeing: that he not let people disrespect him because of his youth (1 Timothy 4:12, *cf.* 1 Corinthians 16:10-11) and that he take care of his health (1 Timothy 5:23).

Why Were These Letters Written?

The overarching presenting reason for 1 and 2 Timothy is the emergence of false teaching in the Church in Ephesus. It is not strange that false teaching might arise in the Church in Ephesus. Ephesus was an important center of commerce and religion in the Roman Empire. Although its ruins are now inland, at the time of Paul's letter, it was a river port with access to the Aegean Sea. Ephesus was also a center of the cult of the Greek goddess Artemis, who was variously (and ironically) held to be the goddess of the hunt, chastity, and childbirth! Paul's two-year ministry there had powerful effects; but ultimately adherents of Artemis provoked a riot, forcing him to leave Ephesus (Acts 19).

On his way back from a preaching mission in Macedonia, Paul called for the elders of the Church of Ephesus to meet him in Miletus, almost 45 miles distant, but in the direct line of his travel from Greece to Jerusalem. In his farewell address to the elders (Acts 20:17-38), Paul warned them that "after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them." (Acts 20:29-30)

Now that time has come. False teachers have arisen professing a smorgasbord of errors: extra-Biblical speculation springboarding from the Law (1 Timothy 1:3-7), legalistic promotion of asceticism (1 Timothy 4:1-5); and an early form of the Greco-Roman philosophy of Gnosticism (which taught that the soul and the body were two distinct entities, one – the soul – good and the other evil, 2 Timothy 4:1-5).

So Paul – as he had previously done in other churches at other times – has sent Timothy to Ephesus as his delegate (1 Timothy 1:3) to remind them of the apostolic Gospel and recall them to a life reflective of obedient trust in Jesus. Paul emphasizes the preeminence of the Word in preaching and teaching; the importance of guarding the unity of the Christian body; the centrality of prayer, orderly worship and godly leadership; and the importance of Christian witness and care for the poor.

In 1 Timothy Paul appears to be still at liberty to travel (1 Timothy 1:3, 2:14). By the time of the second letter, Paul is in prison (2 Timothy 1:8) in Rome, apparently in circumstances quite different from the imprisonment referred to in Acts (contrast 2 Timothy 1:16-17 with Acts 28:30-31). While Paul may have prevailed in one round of judicial proceedings (2 Timothy 4:16-18) he is anticipating his imminent death (4:6-8). Second Timothy thus is often referred to as Paul's farewell address. Toward the end of the letter, we learn how deeply he longs to see his beloved disciple one more time (4:9) – yet he also knows that even death is not the end for him. (4:8,18)

Authorship and Date

In the early Church First and Second Timothy were relatively quickly accepted as authentic letters by Paul. They are cited or alluded to by numerous second century authors (including one possibly dating as early as A.D. 95). They are also mentioned as canonical in the Muratorian fragment, likely originating in Rome about A.D. 180 and the earliest – although not yet comprehensive – description we have of accepted books of the New Testament.

Since the early nineteenth century, however, western critical scholarship has largely challenged Pauline authorship, asserting that 1 and 2 Timothy were likely written by someone else in Paul's name and at a much later time, perhaps well into the second century. The challenge has been grounded primarily in three supposed obstacles to Pauline authorship:

(1) **Differences from the book of Acts:** The central issue here is that the account in Acts of Paul's imprisonment is inconsistent with details in 1 and 2 Timothy, which would have to have occurred subsequent in time to that imprisonment.

(2) **Paul's vocabulary, style and tone** in 1 and 2 Timothy show marked differences from his other writings. Particularly of concern to those who challenge Pauline authorship is the significant number of Greek words that occur only in these two letters and nowhere else in the New Testament.

(3) In recent centuries there has been considerable scholarly speculation that both epistles were written to address the **heresy of Gnosticism** (again, the popular secular philosophy that posited a dualism in the human person between a good soul and an evil body); but this heresy flourished only beginning in the second century, well after Paul's lifetime. If the Epistles to Timothy were written to refute full-

blown Gnosticism, they would have to have been written by some other person using Paul's name. In defense of this particular argument it is said that pseudepigraphy (the ascription of a writing to a person not the actual author) was a widely accepted practice in the ancient world, and was not intended to deceive the reader but was universally understood to be an appropriate means of conveying important information.

The acceptance as canonical of any particular writing in the Bible does not turn in the first instance on the exact identity of the human author, but rather on the Church's consensus as to the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring that writing. (For example, Revelation is accepted as inspired Scripture despite some uncertainty even in the formative centuries as to the precise identity of the "John" who is named as the author.) Nonetheless, while recognizing the force of the arguments asserted against Pauline authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy, most contemporary evangelical and orthodox scholars continue to adhere to the historic Church's acceptance of both letters as genuinely written by Paul.

In doing so, they note that:

(1) The differences between 1 and 2 Timothy and Acts are only conflicts if Acts purports to give a comprehensive account of every event in Paul's life. In reality, in other letters Paul also mentions events Acts doesn't report. So, for instance, in Romans Paul refers to a ministry in Illyricum (modern-day Albania, Romans 15:19), and an intended trip to Spain (Romans 15:24). Neither is mentioned in Acts—yet no one has ever thought to challenge Pauline authorship of Romans on that account.

Thus while Acts refers only to one imprisonment of Paul, there is no reason to believe there could not have been a second – the one reported in 2 Timothy. The premise of Acts is that Paul is innocent of the charges for which he is imprisoned; and Paul himself expected to be released from that imprisonment. Moreover, Church tradition from late in the first century on refers to a second imprisonment; and a second imprisonment under harsher circumstances than the house arrest in Acts better fits the circumstances elsewhere reported in 2 Timothy.

(2) It is true that these two letters do "sound" different to us than others by Paul, and that the vocabulary in particular is different from Paul's other writings. But statistical studies of overall Pauline vocabulary show marked differences from letter to letter among even those letters for which Pauline authorship is unchallenged. Moreover, these are personal letters; and their themes are situational

and contextual as opposed to theological (Romans, Galatians) or ethical (1 and 2 Corinthians). Finally, some of the differences in style and tone are consistent with the writer striving to be sympathetic to the majority of church members who would be converts from Greco-Roman paganism as opposed to Jewish in background – and perhaps to Timothy himself, who also came from mixed parentage.

(3) Close study of 1 and 2 Timothy does not disclose anything like the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century. Errors springing from misapplications of Judaism are as frequently mentioned as the more speculative conjectures of Greek mysticism, which – at least so far as they are reported in this letter – are not nearly as well developed as we know to have been the case by the second century (Mounce, 2000, cxix).

While pseudepigraphy may have been an accepted practice in certain ancient world contexts, the church in fact took a very different attitude toward it, rejecting works that it knew to be fictitiously ascribed to apostles. Indeed, actual apostolic authorship became one of the crucial factors in accepting or rejecting writings as the Church developed its canon in the early centuries, leading to the version of the New Testament that we now have.

A number of scholars do accept that 1 and 2 Timothy may have been dictated to an amanuensis – as we know was in fact the case with others of Paul’s letters. The most likely suggestion is Luke (2 Timothy 4:11) – and it is true that a significant (although small) percentage of the vocabulary of 1 and 2 Timothy is found only there and in Luke or only there and in Luke and in one or two other places in the New Testament.

This introduction thus follows both the historic Church and contemporary orthodox scholarship in accepting Pauline authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy. That determination in turn requires a rather narrow range of possible dates for the letters. 1 Timothy most likely was written following Paul’s release from the imprisonment described in Acts, probably in the early 60s A.D. 2 Timothy would have been written, then, during a succeeding imprisonment, perhaps shortly before Paul’s death, which according to well-established church tradition would have taken place either in A.D. 67 or 68.

Genre

First and Second Timothy do not follow the pattern of most of Paul’s other letters, in which there is a greeting, the statement of one or more questions or

problems, a theological foundation for addressing the problem, applied ethical instruction, and personal greetings. The difference in pattern is, again, owing to the occasional nature of these letters. They are intended to help Timothy deal with the situation in the midst of which he finds himself.

At the same time, it is possible to place each of these letters in the context of a specific known form in other ancient literature. First Timothy (and Titus as well) is best understood as a form of royal correspondence called *mandata principis* (“commandments of a ruler”). Second Timothy has the attributes of a personal paraenetic letter, that is, a personal letter giving exhortation, advice or counsel and based on the personal relationship between the parties. (Johnson, 2001, 97).

Themes

Overall, First and Second Timothy share a concern for the integrity of the Gospel of God’s grace. Both letters therefore address significant space to the issues presented by opponents of the Gospel.

The concern with opponents is expressed somewhat differently both in these two letters as opposed to Paul’s other writings, and between the letters themselves. In contrast to Paul’s other writings, faith in 1 and 2 Timothy is understood more as right belief than as obedience; and righteousness sounds more like a Greek virtue than a characteristic of God’s activity *per se*. This emphasis is consistent with an awareness on Paul’s part that Timothy, himself raised in a gentile context, is ministering in a Church made up significantly of gentile converts.

But 1 and 2 Timothy also do not present a monolithic front between themselves. In 2 Timothy Paul uses specific illustrations and analogies from daily life as part of the rhetoric supporting his exhortations (2:4-6, 15, 20), First Timothy comes across as more abstract, addressing issues specifically and topically – and often the issues that are addressed remain issues for us nearly 2000 years later: the prevalence of same-sex sexual activity (1:10), the interaction of church and state (2:1-7), the role of women in leadership (2:8-15, 3:11, 5:1-16), care for the poor (5:1-16), and affluence in the church (6:6-10, 17-19).

Second Timothy, by contrast, seems to focus more on personalities than on issues. In First Timothy Paul does name Hymenaeus and Alexander – but no others – as opponents (1 Timothy 1:20); both of them appear again in 2 Timothy (2:17, 4:14), along with three other named opponents, three former colleagues who

have left the work (4:10), four friends who have remained loyal to Paul (1:16, 4:11-12); and at least eight others from or to whom greetings are sent (4:19-21).

And finally, as would only be appropriate in a farewell letter, the Gospel is much more explicitly in the forefront of 2 Timothy than of the first letter, as Paul is at pains to convey to his colleague the urgent necessity that the Gospel continue to spread. Nor is it surprising that suffering for that Gospel on the one hand and, on the other, God's faithfulness to preserve the Christian worker and leader through suffering, are both prominent.

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