

THE PASTORAL LETTERS

Titus, 1 & 2 Timothy

The letters to Timothy and Titus are addressed to two acknowledged leaders in the early church, who are identified in Paul's own letters as close companions and true followers of his teaching (1 Cor 4:17, 2 Cor 8:23). All three letters share a deep concern for safeguarding the community from false teaching and accordingly they repeatedly emphasise the importance of "sound teaching" or doctrine (1 Tim 1:10, 4:6, 6:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1, 2, 8) in preserving the stability and order of the community. Prominent themes that emerge in the course of these letters include the question of the organization of the early Christian communities, the exercise of leadership within the Church and the care of its members. Although addressed to individuals these letters provide guidance for the whole church community and lay heavy emphasis on **orthodoxy** (correct belief) and **orthopraxy** (correct behaviour). They are collectively referred to as the 'pastoral letters' because of their concern for the pastoral life of the community. The term is appropriate given that the metaphor of the shepherd or pastor is used extensively in the gospels as an image for those charged with leading and nourishing the community of believers.

Why were these letters written?

These letters appear to have been written at a time when the churches first founded by the early missionaries had grown and become established and were gradually becoming a more accepted part of society. In this new situation, church leaders were understandably anxious to lay down guidelines to ensure the continued wellbeing and good order of the community by refuting false teaching and emphasising the centrality of remaining faithful to the 'sound teaching' they have received. A new concern also emerges in these letters, particularly in First Timothy and Titus; namely, the concern that believers should live lives that can be held in high esteem in the surrounding world and so present the Christian life as fully compatible with good citizenship in civil society. First Timothy sets forth the reason for writing: it is so that the recipient "*may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God*" (1 Tim 3:15) and reject "*whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God*" (1Tim 1:10-11).

Who were Timothy & Titus?

Timothy emerges from the New Testament as one of Paul's closest companions. He came from Lystra in Asia Minor, the son of a Jewish mother and Christian father, and after his conversion accompanied Paul on many of his journeys. Often he would go ahead of Paul to a particular community or remain there after he had left (1 Cor 16:10-11, 1 Tim 1:3). He is mentioned as co-author of five of Paul's letters (2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians) and is described affectionately by the apostle as a beloved and faithful child (1 Cor 4:17). According to 1 Timothy he became a leader in Ephesus and this letter is addressed to him there.

Titus, we know less about. He is mentioned in Acts of the Apostles, but Paul also refers to him in a number of his letters. A Greek youth whom Paul refused to have circumcised, Titus accompanied Paul to the 'Jerusalem Council' where he served as an example of God's spirit at work among Gentiles (Galatians 2). He worked alongside Paul in Corinth where he seems to have played a pivotal role in bringing about a reconciliation between Paul and the rebellious Corinthians (Gal 2:1, 3, 10; 2 Cor 8:6, 16-23). At the beginning of the letter addressed to Titus, he is described as leading the Church on the island of Crete (Tit 1:5).

The Implied Audience of the Pastoral Letters

While these letters are ostensibly addressed to individuals, their message is clearly intended for the wider Christian community. The final blessing in each is addressed in the plural, a clear indication that they were meant to be heard by the entire community. Addressing the letters to Timothy and Titus, two figures remembered in the communities as younger co-workers with Paul, not only suited the content and the purpose of the letters (orderly succession of leaders and correct teaching) but also extended the authority of Paul, through persons associated with him in his own lifetime, to a new generation.

Authorship

Though the first verse of each of these letters ascribes them to Paul the apostle, the vocabulary and style are distinctively different from that of the apostle's own letters. Very few of Paul's great theological themes such as Christ crucified, grace, righteousness, or believers 'living in Christ' appear in these letters. Furthermore, the instructions regarding offices such as

“overseer,” “elders” and “deacons” mirror the increasingly organized and developed structures that came to characterise than community of believers towards the end of the first century (circa. 80-100 CE), rather than the loosely structured charismatic community of Paul’s day.

What is clear is that these letters reflect a stage in the church’s development when the primary emphasis lay no longer in the missionary expansion that had dominated the first decades of Christianity but rather was now centred on the care of established communities in order to help them sustain and live their faith into the future. In this later period, questions concerning the organization of the community and the correct transmission of ‘sound teaching’ become central to the church’s development. By the time these letters come to be written, the understanding of faith, which in the early Pauline writings is still in a stage of dynamic development, is now beginning to be expressed more and more in terms of fixed truths (1 Tim 2:5-6; 3:16) that are often introduced by the formula ‘*This saying is trustworthy*’ (1 Tim 1:15, 4:9-10; 2 Tim 2:11-13 and Tit. 3:8) which alerts the recipient to pay particular attention to the verses that follow.

Exploring the relationship between the Pastoral Letters

The fact that these letters are frequently referred as a collective, that is to say, as The Pastoral Letters, should not blind us to the unique character and focus of each. Whilst all three share a concern for ‘sound teaching’ and combatting false teachers they each have their own distinctive elements. This is particularly true of Second Timothy, which is far more intimate and personal, both in style and content, than the other two. Whilst each is inspired by a deep concern for the pastoral wellbeing of the church they address that concern in very different ways.

The Relative Order of the Letters.

There is considerable debate as to the order in which these letters were first composed. The present canonical order (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus) teaches us little as it arranges them simply in order of descending length.

Because of similarities in language and content between First Timothy and Titus, scholars posit some type of relationship between the two. This may have involved both letters having been written by the same person or, more simply, that one of them was influenced by the other. Because Titus seems to reflect a church situation with fewer and less developed structures than First Timothy, scholars tend to suggest that Titus is more likely to be the earlier of the two.

Neither of the two letters addressed to Timothy shows any awareness of the existence of the other and their content and styles are distinctively different from each other. "First" in this instance does not tell us that this letter was written first, but only that it is the longer of the two and was thus listed first in the Bible.

THEMES IN THE PASTORAL LETTERS.

False Teaching

The danger that false teaching posed to the wellbeing of the Christian community constitutes the fundamental problem faced by the writer of each of the Pastoral Letters and is mentioned in the opening verses of all three. First Timothy urges the reader to "*instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith*" (1 Tim 1:3-4). Second Timothy urges the reader to "*hold to the standard of sound teaching,*" to "*guard the good treasure*" and "*to be aware of those who have turned away from me*" (2 Tim 1:13-14). The opening verse of Titus emphasizes "*the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness*" (Tit. 1:1) and goes on to insist that those chosen to serve as 'overseers' in the community must "*have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it*" (Tit.1:9).

Whilst details regarding the identity of these false teachers are sketchy and the precise nature of their teaching is only vaguely described, First Timothy equates false teaching with "*whatever is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, entrusted to me [Paul]*" (1 Tim 1:10-11). "Sound teaching" by contrast refers to the type of teaching that leads to correct moral behaviour (Tit. 2:14; 3:8). What is unmistakable is the writer's trenchant and stinging criticism of such false teachers (1 Tim 6:3-10, 17-19). They must be silenced and admonished (Tit. 1:10, 13) lest they jeopardize the wellbeing of the community, both in terms of its own faith and also in respect of how it is viewed by the surrounding world.

Whilst the opponents referred to in First Timothy include some with Judaizing tendencies (similar to Gal 5:1-2; Phil 3:1-4), in Titus the polemic is almost entirely focused against this particular group (Tit. 1:10, 14; 3:5, 9). Only in 1 Tim 4:3 do we find a specific false teaching described: namely, a prohibition on marriage and a demand for abstinence from foods which are similar to problems confronted in his own ministry by Paul (1 Cor 7:1-3; 8:4-13; 10:23-22). False teachers are dismissed as being concerned with "*profane myths and old wives' tales*" (1 Tim 4:7) which are unflatteringly contrasted with

“the words of the faith and of the sound teaching” (1 Tim 4:6) that *“hold promise for both the present life and the life to come”* (1 Tim 4:8).

Church Offices

The First Letter to Timothy and the Letter to Titus for the insight they offer into the evolution of leadership roles in the early church. Both letters specify in detail the qualifications required for various positions of leadership in the community. First Timothy mentions four distinct positions or roles: *episkopos*, *presbyteros*, deacons and widows. Titus refers only to the first two and makes no mention of either deacons or widows.

The Greek term *episkopos* originally referred to one who exercised a role in ‘overseeing’ and ‘leading’ a particular community but over time it took on the specific role we now associate with ‘bishop.’ The term ‘*presbyteros*,’ on the other hand, referred to an elder within the community akin to similar positions in Jewish and Greek society. Some modern translations of the bible translate the terms *episkopos* and *presbyteros* as ‘bishop’ and ‘elder’ respectively. This however can, and often does, lead to confusion as readers are tempted to interpret these roles as the well defined church positions we now associate with the terms. To avoid any such misinterpretation, these notes will adhere to the translation favoured by many modern translations of the bible: namely ‘overseer’ for *episkopos* and ‘elder’ for *presbyteros*.

Neither First Timothy nor Titus contain any specific indication of the actual role exercised by overseers, elders and deacons. Instead they limit themselves to listing the various qualifications expected of anyone aspiring to these positions. The qualities mentioned in 1 Tim 3: 1-7 and Tit. 1:7-9 are similar to those that would have been expected of any Jewish or pagan authority figure with the emphasis focused sharply on good management and public respectability. These instructions seek to guarantee that the community is well ordered under reliable leadership so that the church, by virtue of its integrity, will be respected by the surrounding world (1 Tim 3:7). Significantly there is no mention of the charismatic gifts so highly valued in the earlier Pauline churches (2 Corinthians 11-14).

While it is clear that ‘overseers’ were at this stage regarded as a distinct group from deacons, their relationship to elders is more uncertain. The terms seem to be used almost interchangeably at times (Tit. 1:5, 7) and the qualifications required for both (1 Tim 3:1-7 and 1 Tim 5:17-22) betray few discernible differences. We know from the writings of Ignatius early in the second century CE that these two positions were clearly distinct by that stage but it is unclear if this were so at the time that the Pastoral Letters were written. The responsibility of the overseers and elders is succinctly summed up in Titus 1:9 where they are charged to *“hold fast to the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach*

with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it” (see also 1 Tim 3:2, 5:17; 4:13; 2 Tim 2:25; Tit. 2:15). The seriousness of the responsibility entrusted to ‘overseers’ and ‘elders’ is underlined in the exhortation: “Be conscientious about what you do and what you teach; persevere in this, and in this way you will save both yourself and those who listen to you” (1 Tim 4:16).

Women in the Church.

The disproportionately critical view of women evident in the Pastoral Letters has long been and continues to be a source of considerable controversy. The writer harshly censures women regarding appropriate dress and conduct and expressly prohibits them teaching or having authority over any man (1 Tim 2:12, see also 1 Cor 14:34-35). It is not immediately clear why women are singled out for such censure but all three pastoral letters seem to reflect a deep rooted cultural bias that was suspicious of women’s ability to control their sexual passions (1 Tim 5:11-15; 2 Tim 3:6-8; Tit. 2:4-5) and generally viewed females as weak-willed and therefore easy prey to false teachers.

How then are we to interpret such passages when we read our sacred scriptures today? Firstly, we must begin by recognizing and being sensitive to the great hurt caused to women by these passages down through the generations. Secondly we must read these passages in the context of the whole of the biblical witness, remembering Christ’s radical inclusion of women in the gospels, Paul’s own clear references to women’s role in prophecy (1 Cor 11:1-13), leadership and service (Rom 16:1) and his challenge to the early community to rise up to a radical new vision of equality, centered on the person of Christ, in which there would be ‘neither male nor female’ (Gal 3:28). Moreover it should be noted that the interpretation of the Adam and Eve story (1 Tim 2:13-15) offered here to justify the subordination of women differs sharply from Paul’s own teaching elsewhere where he clearly speaks of Adam’s sin, not Eve’s (Rom 5:12-19).

Most modern commentators agree that these verses are best understood as reflecting contemporary cultural norms (in this instance those of the strongly patriarchal world of the Mediterranean world in the first century CE) and, as such, they do not constitute a timeless prescription for women’s roles in the Christian community.

Read each of the Pastoral Letters slowly and separately and take note of the concerns and issues raised in each.

- *From your own reading of the letters what do you think motivated the author to write these letters?*
- *What ideas or principles do these letters advocate?*
- *What struck you as different about these letters as compared to Paul's own letters?*

THE LETTER TO TITUS

This letter is addressed to 'Titus,' a symbolic figure representing a later generation of believers interested in preserving Pauline traditions. The writer commissions 'Titus' to appoint elders in every town, thus affording him the opportunity to outline the requirements for those who wish to exercise responsibility in the community. The terms 'overseer' [*episkopos*] and 'elder' [*prebyteros*] appear to be used almost interchangeably with the emphasis focused on their responsibility to safeguard the received teaching, to adhere to established beliefs and to correct those who contradict such beliefs (Tit 1:5-9) rather than on any distinction that may have existed between the two roles. The author stresses that because Christians are living in a nonbelieving world they must live exemplary lives in full obedience to civil authority (Tit 3:1) and thereby contribute to the Church being favorably perceived in the wider society (Tit 2:1-10).

Despite being the shortest of the pastoral letters, Titus is, in many respects, the richest in its theological elaboration. Tit 3:4-8, for example, represents an extraordinarily profound theological exploration of the meaning and effect of baptism that serves almost as a synthesis of Pauline theology while Tit 2:11-15 explores the basis of the Christian life in relation of the two comings of Christ: we are saved by Jesus' first coming but it is his future appearance that is the source of our hope and the basis of our motivation for living a good and faithful life (that is spelled out in the household code in Tit 2:1-10). Such an understanding shows just how far the community had moved from the expectation of an imminent return by Christ that is evident in Paul's earlier letters.

THE FIRST LETTER TO TIMOTHY

Here, an anonymous author writes to 'Timothy' as the symbolic representative of a new generation of Christians, warning his readers against the dangers of false teachings and recommending the standards necessary for ensuring proper order and discipline within the church. The writer's primary purpose is stated in the opening verses, namely to combat the spread of

'erroneous teaching' (1:1-3) threatening the faith of the community and much of the letter is made up of various instructions on how to preserve and nurture the faith and well being of the community of believers.

Whilst it is difficult to determine the precise nature of this false teaching, First Timothy describes it as involving "*myths and unending genealogies*" and "*empty speculation.*" Its practitioners may have included Jewish Christian legalists (1:7-10) and ascetics or puritans who forbade marriage and abstained from certain foods. The appointment of leaders within the community is directly linked to the threat that such false teaching poses to the well being of the community. The avowed purpose and goal of the letter is unambiguously stated from the very beginning: "*The final goal at which this instruction aims is love, issuing from a pure heart, a clear conscience and a sincere faith*" (1:5). As in the Pauline letters there is a pronounced correlation between correct belief and proper understanding. A proper understanding of faith must of its very nature issue forth in a moral and virtuous life. The stirring metaphor towards the close of the letter that exhorts the reader "*to fight the good fight of faith*" (6:12) highlights the seriousness of the challenge faced in opposing false teaching.

First Timothy, moreover, is notable for its particular distrust of wealth (6:5-10, 17-19) including its famous quotation "*The love of money is the root of all evils*" (6:10). Wealthy believers are explicitly exhorted to "*be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share*" (6:18) and so build a solid foundation for the future and enter into the "*life that really is life*" (6:19).

THE SECOND LETTER TO TIMOTHY

While Second Timothy most likely comes from a hand other than Paul, scholars suggest that many of the biographical details it contains may reflect authentic Pauline traditions. This letter is essentially a reflection on Paul's ministry in the context of a personal farewell, written almost in the style of a last will and testament, in which the apostle instructs his close friend Timothy on how his ministry is to be continued after his death. 'Timothy' functions here as in First Timothy as a representative figure for all who will succeed Paul as teachers of the faith. The overarching concern of the letter is that Paul's legacy be continued by adhering to and emulating the example of the apostle's own life and mission (2 Tim 1:6; 4:1-8). The poignant passages that narrate the hardships and sufferings Paul has endured stand as a stark reminder to all would-be-teachers that their calling will most likely involve fidelity much more than success.

Second Timothy also is significant in that it reveals the high esteem in which the scriptures (understood in this context as the Hebrew Scriptures which we Christians now refer to as the Old Testament) were held in the early

church. Second Timothy insists that they are the standard by which correct teaching is to be measured and the author insists that they have an intrinsic role to play in confounding error as well as in the task of training in righteousness and equipping believers for every good work (2 Tim 3:5-17).

Are the Pastoral Letters a faithful continuation of the Pauline tradition?

It is obvious even to the casual reader that the vision of the Church set forth in the Pastoral Letters differs sharply from that espoused in the early Pauline letters. Here a tightly organized community is focused on using scripture, inherited doctrines and clearly established leadership roles to ensure correct belief (orthodoxy) and correct behaviour (orthopraxy). These letters seem to interpret revelation as something that is already complete, a static self-contained legacy from the past that must be faithfully preserved and transmitted. Within such a vision there seems to be little room for Paul's injunction not to stifle the Spirit and the voice of prophecy (1 Thess 5:19-20) or indeed the charismatic gifts so famously celebrated in 1 Corinthians 12. The question inevitably arises therefore: Are the Pastoral Letters a faithful continuation of the Pauline vision of church?

In addressing any such question, it must also be remembered that these letters were addressed to a very different situation than that faced originally by Paul and one should not underestimate the very real challenges faced by the community as it became increasingly more established. Modern sociology identifies certain key stages in the formation of any community, amongst them: a founding vision, the gathering of a community, a clear mission and organization. Within such a scheme the organizational dimension seeks to provide structures to the community that can help it achieve its mission whilst remaining faithful to its founding vision. The ever present challenge of balancing these different dimensions is captured well by renowned biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown when he writes:

If the Pastoral Letters have developed a more stable structure than that dependent on charisms, has 1 Corinthians 12 lost all relevance for such a structured church? Does it portray simply a past stage of early church life? Or in order to be faithful to the whole New Testament, must not a church structured by appointed officials also have room for those raised up in a nonsystematic way through the gift of the Spirit? To what extent must those gifted by the Spirit show obedience and respect to officials who are part of a structure that was called into being by the same Spirit? These are enduring issues in the Christian churches.

Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Fr Sean O' Sullivan
Cork & Ross Office of Adult Religious Education