

THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

The Epistles to Timothy and Titus are commonly called the Pastoral Epistles because they are unique among Paul's Epistles, not simply in their date (probably the latest of his Epistles) or in their style and vocabulary (which are sufficiently different to cause many to dispute their authorship), but in their destination and purpose. They are not, like Paul's other Epistles, addressed to congregations, but to individuals, and not just to house-church hosts, like Philemon, but to fellow evangelists and church-planters, whom Paul had authorised to be his delegates in his absence (Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete) and to perform apostolic tasks on his behalf. Such delegates would be especially needed towards the end of his ministry, when his temporary absences looked like becoming permanent, so this would account for the three Epistles being his latest; and the differences of style and vocabulary might also be partly due, not just to the aging of the author, but to the nature of the Epistles, as giving careful instruction to others on how to perform tasks which he well knew from experience how to perform himself.

The historical background to the Epistles is different from that recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, and is probably subsequent to it. In 1 Timothy and Titus Paul appears to have been released for a time from the Roman imprisonment which is still continuing at the end of Acts, but in 2 Timothy Paul is experiencing a second Roman imprisonment, which he is expecting will lead to martyrdom (2 Tim. 1:12; 2:9; 4:6-8).

The Christian gospel of salvation through the grace of Christ is central to these Epistles, as to Paul's other Epistles, and comes to specially clear expression in Titus 2:11-14 and Titus 3:3-7, where we read in turn of Christ's incarnation, our conversion, Christ's glorious reappearing, his deity, his atonement, our cleansing, our fallen state, his love, his mercy, our regeneration, our endowment with the Holy Spirit, our justification, our adoption and our hope of eternal life. It is for this reason that the Epistles give repeated warnings against Judaizing, as being a threat to the gospel of grace and faith (1 Tim. 1:3-7; Titus 1:10-16), and judge it to be good grounds for excommunication (Titus 3:9-11), no less than the other false teaching condemned in 1 Tim. 1:19-20 and 2 Tim.2:16-18.

The Epistles also speak twice of grave future decline in the Christian church and the rise of dangerous heresy (1 Tim.4:1-5; 2 Tim.3:1-9), as Paul does elsewhere in his address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:29-31) and especially in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12.

The Epistles emphasise the importance of Scripture, as the basis for faith and the guide for teaching (2 Tim. 3:15-17), and the importance of teaching as a guard against false doctrine (1 Tim.1:3; 4:6,16; 2 Tim.2:24-26; 4:1-4) and as instruction in virtuous behaviour (Titus 2:1-10; 3:1-2, 8). Virtuous behaviour, as in Jesus' teaching, includes resisting the love of wealth (1 Tim.3:3, 8; 6:5-10, 17-19; 2 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7).

Alongside the importance of teaching, the Epistles stress also the importance of corporate prayer and thanksgiving: this is to be offered for all people, including rulers (1 Tim.2:1-4); and, as in the synagogue, those who lead in prayer are, at least normally, to be men (tous andras, verse 8).

This brings us on to the relationship between the sexes, regarding which these Epistles have much to say.

They respect monogamous marriage, and regard it as suitable for ordained ministers (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). The forbidding of marriage they view as a serious heresy (1 Tim. 4:1-3). They consider that the main role of a wife is in the home, to manage the household and to bear and bring up children (1 Tim. 5:14; Titus 2:5). They believe that wives should be submissive to their husbands (Titus 2:4-5). They encourage younger widows to remarry (1 Tim. 5:14). Older widows should set their hope on God, but draw earthly support from their children or grandchildren, or, failing that, from the church (1 Tim. 5:3-10, 16). So much for family relationships. Outside of these, the Epistles condemn fornication and homosexual practices as lawless (1 Tim. 1:9-11).

In the context of the congregation, the Epistles not only assign the leading of prayer to men (1 Tim. 2:8) but also teaching and authority, whereas women are to show modesty and to learn in quietness with all submissiveness (verses 9-12). They should bear in mind that Adam was created before Eve, and so was senior to her, and that what Eve led the way in was in being deceived and in transgressing (verses 13-15). This is not to say that no woman could exercise authority wisely or teach truly, but that the representative woman could not, and that she should be our object-lesson. So if the Church of England goes on to fill half or more of the posts of its ordained ministry, whether as presbyters or bishops, with clones of the Vicar of Dibley, it will, I fear, have only itself to blame, for not having taken warning from the case of Eve.

Against this background, the Epistles begin to deal with the ordained ministry, first of bishops, in 1 Tim. 3:1-7, and then of deacons, in verses 8-13. By 'bishops' (episkopoi) is evidently meant 'presbyter-bishops', as is clear from Titus 1:5-9, where 'presbyter' or 'elder' (presbuteros) is interchanged with 'bishop' (episkopos). There is a similar interchange of these titles in Acts 20:17, 28. 1 Timothy 3 specifies the qualifications of character and behaviour required for ordination to the offices of bishop and deacon, indicating that to be a good head of a household fits a person for a similar ecclesiastical role, and adding, in the case of a bishop, that he must not be a novice and must be apt to teach (verses 2, 4-6, 12). Verse 11 is often interpreted as referring to women deacons rather than deacons' wives, but the following words, 'Let deacons be husbands of one wife' (verse 12), make this uncertain. Another list of qualifications for the office of bishop or presbyter is given in Titus 1:5-9, and verse 5 says that to ordain such men was one of the main purposes for which Paul had left Titus in Crete.

1 Timothy 5:17-21 deals with the remuneration and disciplining of presbyter-bishops, and verse 22 is a warning against hastily ordaining those who are really unfit. 2 Timothy 2:2 urges Timothy, on the contrary, to commit the apostolic gospel to faithful persons who will be able to teach others also, while 2 Timothy 1:6 urges the ordained to stir up the gift that God has given them through ordination, and not to let it go to waste.

