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How To Behave in the Household of God: Introducing 1 Timothy

JAMES W. THOMPSON

Many books are worth having on our shelves but do not make very good reading. A medical handbook, a copy of *Robert's Rules of Order*, and the IRS code are useful reference works but hardly worth the effort to read from beginning to end. For many of us, our past experience with 1 Timothy leaves us with the impression that it may be a useful manual for giving the rules for public worship and the qualifications for church leaders but hardly a book that we want to read in its entirety. One does not have very high expectations for a book that consists largely of lists and appears to provide an organizational chart for the church. We face major obstacles in reclaiming it as a book actually worth reading.

Our impressions may be determined by the fact that the Pastoral Epistles, of which 1 Timothy is the longest and most influential, do not breathe the same air as the other letters of Paul. Unlike Romans or Galatians, for example, 1 Timothy has no sustained theological argument. The book is composed almost entirely of instructions that Paul directs Timothy to communicate to the church in Ephesus (1:3). Anyone who reads the Pastoral Epistles in Greek will note the extraordinary difference between them and the other letters of Paul. Whereas Paul's major letters are scarcely concerned with offices, 1 Timothy places this topic at the center. Some historians consider 1 Timothy a midway point between Paul's earlier letters and Ignatius's call for the monarchical bishop in the early second century. Consequently, scholars have questioned the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles for more than two centuries, arguing that the letter's style, setting, and focus on qualifications for office holders preclude Pauline authorship.

Those who gathered the letters of Paul into one collection apparently noted the distinctiveness of the Pastoral Epistles by placing them after the letters to the churches. Before 1 Timothy, the sequence of Paul's letters is determined by length. The fact that 1 Timothy is considerably longer than 2 Thessalonians suggests that a new collection begins with Paul's letters to individuals. In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul addresses the

same envoys who have served him in the previous correspondence. Just as Timothy's task in 1 Cor 4:17 is to "explain [Paul's] ways," his role in 1 Timothy is to speak on Paul's behalf. From beginning to end, Timothy's assignment is not to speak on his own behalf but to deliver Paul's instructions (e.g., 1:3; 2:1, 8; 3:1; 4:11). Timothy is not, as he has often been portrayed in the churches, the local evangelist who works alongside the elders and deacons but Paul's itinerant ambassador who has no authority of his own.

In contrast to the task of Titus (cf. Titus 1:5), Timothy's task is not to lay out a blueprint for church organization. According to Acts (20:17),



the Ephesian church has elders already. Although Timothy may ordain elders (5:17), the offices of bishop (3:1-7), deacon (3:8-13), elder (5:17-22), and enrolled widow (5:2-16) are already assumed within the letter. Timothy's task, therefore, is not to organize the church, but to ensure that the leaders possess the proper qualities of character. To read the letter as an organizational chart or a book of lists, therefore, is to miss its essential contribution to the collection of Paul's letters. We will benefit by not measuring 1 Timothy against Paul's major letters but by recognizing the letter's genre, rhetorical qualities, and canonical functions.

THE GENRE OF 1 TIMOTHY

Although 1 Timothy is addressed to Timothy, the letter is not actually private correspondence for Paul writes to strengthen the hand of his emissary as he instructs the church on Paul's behalf. The closest analogy to 1 Timothy can be found in ancient letters in the Greco-Roman world in which a government official writes to a subordinate who is commissioned to act on behalf of the official. These letters often contained instructions for the envoy responsible for carrying out administrative tasks and advice on the appointment of local people to positions of leadership.

One example is a papyrus fragment in which an Egyptian official instructs his subordinate in his duties. Much of the letter describes the specific tasks of the subordinate. The letter also describes the qualities of character of the envoy and his manner of conducting himself in the new position. He is expected to be an example for others to imitate.¹ Such letters were often sent to Roman proconsuls and prefects in the first century. Although the letter was addressed to the envoy, it had a larger audience for it served in the local communities to demonstrate that the measures enacted were not the directives of the subordinate but were the will of the chief administrator.

Because 1 Timothy resembles this ancient letter genre, we may assume that it is also the letter to the church indicating that Timothy's instructions carried the full weight of Paul's authority.

THE RHETORIC OF 1 TIMOTHY

The Setting

We move beyond understanding 1 Timothy as a reference work when we recognize that the letter has a coherent argument addressed to a particular setting. The rhetorical situation is a crisis facing the church, which the letter mentions at the beginning. Paul has left Timothy in Ephesus in order that he "may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies" (1:3). The church faces imminent danger of a variety of destructive false teachings (4:1-5).

Although many scholars have attempted to identify this false teaching with one of the heresies known to us from the early church, these attempts have been unsuccessful for Paul's task is not to delineate the nature of the heresy threatening the church but to describe its effect on the church. Indeed, the letter focuses more on the heretics' immoral behavior than on their teachings, suggesting that false teaching results in immoral behavior. False teachers are "conceited, understanding nothing" (6:4), and are guilty of "envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain" (6:5). With their "seared" consciences (4:2) and "morbid craving for controversy" (6:3), Paul describes them as a dangerous disease infecting the church (cf. "gangrene" in 2 Tim. 2:17).

The only answer to this disease is healthy teaching. The letter contains two striking metaphors that do not appear outside the Pastoral Epistles. In the first place, the letter extends the medical metaphor to describe the "sound (literally *healthy*) teaching" (1:10) that the church requires. Just as false teaching results in immoral conduct, "sound teaching" results in ethical conduct. (6:3-5).

In the second place, the letter contains a banking metaphor to describe the importance of the instruction that Timothy communicates. The Christian message is a *deposit* (or *trust*). Near the beginning of the letter, Paul describes what has been entrusted to him (1:11). In the concluding lines of the letter, Paul says,

“Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you” (NRSV 6:20). In the latter instance, he uses the term (*paratheke*) that was commonly used for bank deposits. That is, the future of the church rests on preserving a “deposit” that remains unchanged from one generation to the next.

Whereas the consequence of false teaching may be seen in the immoral conduct of the heretics, the aim of good instruction is “love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith” (1:5). Thus the book’s frequent lists of qualifications are, in fact, the qualities of character that are consistent with healthy teaching.

Tracing the Argument

Like an orator who carefully makes his case, Paul proceeds carefully to persuade Timothy and the church to address the crisis that confronts them, giving a history of the problem that Timothy faces. After the salutation in 1:1-2, the letter begins with a statement of the problem at hand and a brief history of the situation in Ephesus (1:3-11), preparing the way for the instructions to follow. Timothy’s task is especially urgent because “some people have deviated” from the truth (1:6).

As the authority for the instructions to follow, Paul first establishes his credibility in 1:12-17, indicating that God has “judged [him] faithful” and appointed him for service (1:12). With his transformation from the foremost of sinners (1:15) to God’s spokesman, he has become an example for others to follow (1:16). Thus, in a letter that focuses on the qualities of character that make one a model for others (cf. 4:12), Paul’s autobiographical statement is an appropriate prelude for the instructions that follow.

Paul’s charge to Timothy in 1:18-20 is the thesis statement of the letter. Paul is the mentor who commissions his pupil for the task ahead. When Paul says, “I am giving you these instructions” (1:18), he employs the banking metaphor; he is literally “making a deposit” (*paratithemai*) with Timothy of the instructions that follow. That is, Timothy goes as Paul’s envoy, bringing not his own ideas, but the very authority of Paul. The reference to those who have “suffered shipwreck in the faith” (1:19) reflects the crisis in the church and the need to preserve the deposit of faithfulness that Timothy has inherited.

Paul’s charge in 1:18-20 sets the stage for the remainder of the letter, which consists of the specific instructions from Paul. Here we note the household setting of the early church. Indeed, Timothy acts in Paul’s absence to ensure that we “may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). The setting of the house church reinforces the image of the church as the “household of God.” The instructions in the letter appear to be an expansion of the familiar household code that appears in Colossians (3:18-4:1) and Ephesians (5:21-6:9). Timothy’s task is to ensure that the deposit of faith is maintained by the appropriate behavior of members of the extended household.

The instructions for men and women in 2:1-15 are reminiscent of the instructions for husbands and wives in the earlier household codes. In the setting of the house church, Paul delineates the roles for men and women, knowing that the community can preserve the faith only where members have shared expectations for behavior and orderly conduct in the household of God. Paul’s introductory words, “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (2:2), provide the heading for the roles of men and women, suggesting a concern for order and the impression that the church will make on outsiders. Both men and women can avoid disorder by adopting their respective roles: men by praying without quarreling and wrangling (2:8), women by adorning themselves without expensive clothing and without taking on the role of authoritative teacher (2:12). By learning in “quietness” (2:12), they manifest the “quietness” that Paul expects of the entire church (2:2).

With the crisis facing the church, authoritative teaching is of critical importance. The prohibition of authoritative teaching by the women anticipates the instructions for bishops and deacons in chapter 3. The church will meet the crisis by consolidating the teaching office in the role of the bishop, who must be “an apt teacher” (3:2).

The focus of chapter 3 is not on the organizational chart of the congregation, but on the qualities of character among the church's leaders. If we understand 1 Timothy as an expansion of the familiar household code, the bishop plays a role analogous to the father in the household, whose management of his own household is a precondition for one who exercises authority in the house church (3:4). The qualities of character required of bishops and deacons reflect the impact of healthy teaching on their lives. Whereas the heretics are known for the destructive effects of their teaching on their conduct (e.g., 6:3-9), those who lead the church will demonstrate the habits that accompany good teaching as they model the life that is consistent with proper teaching.

According to chapter 4, the crisis facing the church (e.g., 4:1-5) requires that Paul's emissary also must teach and provide an example for the Christian community. Timothy's task is to "put these things before the brothers" (4:6), having received the proper diet and exercise in the Christian faith (4:7-8). Like Paul (1:16), Timothy is an example of the qualities of character that are present in one who teaches the Christian faith (4:11).

Timothy's role is not analogous to the local minister who works alongside the elders. As Paul's itinerant messenger, Timothy offers instructions for this extended family, which includes older men and women (5:1-2), widows (5:3-16), slaves (6:1-2), and rich people (6:17-19). He has the authority to rebuke older men and older women (5:1-2), but he is advised to do so with care. Just as he ensures that the offices of bishop and deacon are filled by people of character, his task is to ensure that those who are appointed as enrolled widows have qualities that parallel the qualifications for bishops. Widows must be blameless (5:7; cf. 3:2), be the wife of one husband (5:9; cf. 3:2), and exhibit domestic virtues (5:10; cf. 3:4).

He has the authority to ordain elders (5:17-22), but he must appoint them with care. Because their labor of teaching and preaching is vital to the church, Timothy must exercise caution as he appoints elders to that task and receives charges against them (5:20). As he teaches the entire community how to behave in the household of God (3:15), he instructs each group on the qualities of character that are consistent with the gospel, encouraging them to adopt a way of life that is the opposite of the immoral conduct of the false teachers.

Paul's final words, "Oh Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you" (6:20), summarizes the content of the letter. The numerous lists, the attention to order in worship, and the offices within the community serve the larger purpose of the book, indicating that a church that wants to maintain its identity must create the proper environment for the gospel to flourish.

1 TIMOTHY IN CANONICAL CONTEXT

Arguments about the background of 1 Timothy often miss the continuing value of this letter for the life of the church. The Pastoral Epistles provide an appropriate conclusion to the letters of Paul for they envision a church that lives on in the absence of Paul. The letter anticipates the transition from Paul's immediate ministry to a time when it must apply his words to new generations.

The focus on preserving the deposit of faith is a reminder that the battle of ideas is important and that the Christian faith must measure all expressions of Christianity against apostolic witness. The emphasis on order and structure in 1 Timothy indicates that the forms and structures of worship and leadership cannot be neatly peeled away from the gospel, for the gospel is best preserved with structures that are consistent with the message.

When we recognize the purposes of 1 Timothy, we see its continuing message to the church.

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