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# The Christological Motivation of Christian Ministry in 1 Timothy

LEE MAGNESS

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## INTRODUCTION: PRACTICAL OR THEOLOGICAL?

Many treatments of the Pastoral Epistles give short shrift to theological matters, focusing instead on so-called “practical” concerns.<sup>1</sup> Those that do mention the theological content of the Pastorals frequently discuss it only in the context of the authorship debate.<sup>2</sup> In the process, they ignore the theological richness of the Pastorals, overlook the pastoral function of their theological insights, and miss the inherent connection between Christian theology and Christian ministry.

This tendency is true among those who affirm Pauline authorship of the Pastorals as well as those who deny it. One conservative commentator wrote, “The pastoral Epistles are primarily practical rather than theological. The emphasis lies on the defense of doctrine rather than its explication or elaboration. The distinctively doctrinal passages comprise only a small part of the whole ...”<sup>3</sup> At the other end of the spectrum of the authorship debate (labeling the author “intense,” “intolerant,” “intellectually unadventurous,” and “inflicted with an occupational disease of administrators,”), the commentator in the widely used *Interpreter’s Bible* asserts that “The writer’s ideas are more practical than profound.”<sup>4</sup> Such statements create a false dichotomy between practical instruction and theological understanding, create a false impression that doctrine serves only as defense, and create a false sense of the doctrinal paucity of the Pastorals themselves.<sup>5</sup>

There are voices to the contrary, like that of the New Testament scholar who recognizes that the appeal of the Pastorals “lies in their blend of sound practical advice and theological statement.”<sup>6</sup> One recent article on the Christological passage in 3:16 rightly sees it not only as a pivotal passage in 1 Timothy but also as an integral component of the letter’s discussion of Christian ministry.<sup>7</sup> But these voices are in the minority. So partly to correct the pervasive tendency to ignore the theological depth of the Pastorals and partly to reaffirm

the positive connection between Christian theology and Christian ministry, this article explores that intersection. My ultimate goal is to model an appropriate use of the Pastorals in the life and ministry of the churches today, taking them seriously as theologically-informed pastoral instruction—not just the boxing-ring of choice for the ongoing debate over Pauline authorship.

## THE CHRISTOLOGY OF 1 TIMOTHY

Christology is a thorough-going feature of 1 Timothy. From beginning to end, the doctrine of Christ informs every aspect of this ancient Christian letter.



### *The Christological Content of 1 Timothy*

First, there are the *titles* by which Jesus is called. Although he is called “Christ” only once (5:11), he is never only Jesus. He is “Christ Jesus” at every turn, wearing the title “Messiah” like a royal mantle. On occasion he is called the Lord Jesus Christ or Jesus Christ the Lord (1:2, 12; 6:3, 14). As Messiah and Lord, Jesus rescues and rules. He is our salvation and our sovereign.

Second, there are the *metaphors* which highlight his identity. Jesus is the king who commissions his emissaries (1:1). Jesus is our hope (1:1), the future into which we lean, both temporal and eternal. Jesus is our mediator (2:5), the arbiter in the process of reconciliation, the surety for the debt we owe. And Jesus is our ransom (2:6), the price, the person who makes the payment—who is the payment—which liberates us, kidnapped as we are by self, enslaved as we are to sin.

Third, there are the *references* to the exemplary life and saving work of Christ. The author is interested in both the appearing and the purpose of Christ—“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1:15). 1 Timothy 3:16 mentions Jesus’ incarnation—“manifested in the flesh”—and his resurrection—“vindicated in the spirit”—and his ascension and exaltation—“revealed to angels.” The same verse tells us that he has been proclaimed by God’s people to all people—“preached among the nations”—that he became the object of faith—“believed on in the world”—and that he will return—“taken up in glory.”<sup>8</sup> During his trials before the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, Jesus bore witness to his own identity (6:13). Eventually he gave himself as a ransom for all people (2:6). Finally, Jesus’ presence will manifest itself once again at his appearing (6:14).

### *The Christological Connection to Theology in 1 Timothy*

Christological statements referring to the titles of Christ, the identity of Christ, and the work of Christ are not only pervasive in 1 Timothy, they are overwhelmingly *theo*-logical. To a striking degree, the identity and ministry of Christ are connected with the nature and work of God. Some scholars, by focusing on this statement or that, have categorized the treatment of Jesus in this letter as an “epiphany” Christology (Dibelius and Conzelmann) or a “Title” Christology (Trummer).<sup>9</sup> Others are simply content to characterize it as a “high” Christology. Let it suffice for now to say, as one writer puts it, “When we turn from God the Father to Christ, we notice at once that he is mentioned in the same breath.”<sup>10</sup> Some of the examples in 1 Timothy where Christ and God are closely interconnected include the following:

- 1:1—Paul’s apostleship comes at the command of both **God** our savior and **Christ Jesus** our hope.
- 1:2—The grace and mercy and peace he wishes his readers come from both **God** our father and **Christ Jesus** our Lord.
- 1:4—Timothy must promote the “economy” of **God** in the context of faith (in **Christ**).
- 1:10-11—Timothy must proclaim the “healthy” teaching of the glorious good news (of **Jesus Christ**<sup>11</sup>) which was entrusted to Paul by the blessed **God**.
- 1:12-13—Paul’s strength comes from **Christ Jesus** our Lord, while the mercy in which he ministers comes from **God** (see the divine passive).
- 1:14—Paul serves in the abundance of the grace of **God** (“the Lord”) along with the faith and love that is in **Christ Jesus**.
- **Christ Jesus** came into the world to save sinners (1:15); **God** is also our savior (1:1; 2:3).
- 1:16—**God** showed his mercy to Paul (divine passive), and **Christ Jesus** demonstrated his longsuffering in Paul.
- 1:17—**Christ Jesus** is the object of Paul’s faith, **God** the recipient of Paul’s praise.
- 2:1-7—References to **God** our savior, the only one, are paired with references to **Christ Jesus**, our mediator and ransom.
- 2:15—The woman will be saved by **God** (divine passive) through the bearing of a child, **Jesus Christ**<sup>12</sup>.



- References to the house of **God**, the church of **God**, and reverence to **God** in 3:15 are balanced by the creedal assertions about **Christ** in 3:16.
- The paragraph in 4:6-10 that begins with a focus on Timothy as a servant of **Christ Jesus** ends with a focus on the living **God**, the object of our hope and the source of salvation for all.
- 5:21; 6:13—Paul testifies to Timothy in the light of his standing before both **God** and **Christ Jesus**.
- 6:14-16—Paul’s reference to the appearing of our Lord **Jesus Christ** is immediately followed by a doxology to **God**.

What is the significance of the fact that at every turn Christ Jesus is associated with God in 1 Timothy? It would be tempting to employ the category “theo-centric” Christology or to buy into the language of “high” Christology. But as important as this Christological emphasis is, and as significant as its “theo”-logical connection is, the most stunning feature of the Christology of the letter is not how “high” it is but how complete it is. This Christ Jesus, who is mentioned “in the same breath” with God, who like God is lord, is “Christ Jesus the human” (2:5). This Christ Jesus, who saves in association with God the savior, was “manifested in the flesh” (3:16). The incarnate one is inseparable from the immortal one. And that to me is the highest Christology—not a view of Christ that demonstrates only his divinity but one that keeps his humanity clearly in focus as well.

### **THE CHRISTOLOGICAL MOTIVATION OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN 1 TIMOTHY**

But the connection I find most compelling in 1 Timothy, or at least more central to the message of the letter even than the theological connection between Christ and God, is the pastoral connection between the person and ministry of God in Christ and the ministry of the Christian.<sup>13</sup>

#### *The Christological Motivation of Ministry as seen in the Structure of 1 Timothy*

The Christological motivation for Christian ministry can be seen in the very structure of 1 Timothy. In each main section of practical instruction, the pastoral advice is either bracketed by or climaxed by Christological and/or theological statements.

Section 1: 1:1-11: In the first instructional section (1:3-10), Paul gives Timothy advice regarding false teachers who have abandoned God’s work for baseless controversies. This advice is preceded by an epistolary preface whose language is heavily Christological and theological—“apostle of Christ Jesus,” “command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,” “grace and mercy and peace from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (1:1-2). And it is followed by a powerful reference to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ which belongs to the blessed God (1:11).

Section 2: 1:12-17: Next, Paul reminds Timothy of the before-and-after actions of his own life. The “before” of his sinful past (1:13) is bracketed by references to Christ Jesus our Lord who strengthened and appointed Paul to ministry (1:12) and to the grace and faith and love he had found in the Lord (probably God here) and Jesus Christ (1:14). The “after” of his life of faith and forgiven-ness (1:16) is bracketed by the “trustworthy saying” that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1:15) and the doxology to the “only God” in 1:17.

Section 3: 2:1-15: Between Paul’s pastoral request for lives of prayer (2:1-2) and the statement of his pastoral purpose as a proclaimer (2:7), stands the near creedal reference to God our Savior, the one God, and Christ Jesus, our mediator and ransom (2:3-6). Still in the context of prayer, Paul’s admonition to Timothy to monitor the behavior of men and women in 2:8-10 has as its goal the sincere worship of God (2:10). And the admonition regarding the tranquil, submissive lives of women (2:11-14) is climaxed with the reminder that they are saved by one born to a woman just like them, that is, by Christ (2:15).

Section 4: 3:1-13: Next, at the core of Paul’s description of the qualities of an overseer (3:1-7) is the reminder that the function of an elder is to “take care of God’s church” (3:5). And the climax of his descrip-



tion of the qualities of male and female servants in the church (3:8-12) is the reminder that their service gains them “an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” (3:13).

Section 5: 3:14-4:16: In the next section of his letter, Paul returns to the problem of false teaching (3:14-4:16). He punctuates his four admonitions—“teach people how to conduct themselves in God’s household” (3:15), remember that “some will abandon the faith” (4:1-3), “train yourself to be godly” (4:6-8), and “command and teach these things”/“watch your life and doctrine closely” (4:11-16)—with three Christological or theological statements—“he appeared in the flesh,” etc. (3:16), “for everything God created is good” (4:4-5), and “we have put our hope in the living God, who is the savior of all people” (4:9-10).

Section 6: 5:1-16: The next section (5:1-16), which focuses on instructions for the conduct and ministry of widows, is punctuated by two important appeals. The first appeal urges widows to “put their religion into practice by caring for their own family” precisely because that is behavior “pleasing to God” (5:4). The second appeal urges young widows to behave in such a way that they maintain “their dedication to Christ” (5:11).

The core of the last two sections of 1 Timothy (5:17-6:2 and 6:3-21) also gives evidence of a corresponding emphasis on ministry in the light of the person and work of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, built into the very structure of each main instructional section of the letter, by means of statements that bracket or punctuate or climax the practical advice, Christological and theological affirmations undergird every pastoral admonition.

#### *The Christological Motivation of Ministry as seen in the Teachings of 1 Timothy*

Finally, let me demonstrate in the teachings of 1 Timothy how a Christological motivation underlies every aspect of Christian ministry.

The very *purpose* for which Christ came into the world was to save sinners (1:15). And the intended outcome of Christian ministry is also the salvation of others. In 4:10, in reference to the outcome of evangelism, that is, salvation,<sup>14</sup> the author says: “for this very reason we labor to exhaustion and wrestle on, because we have placed our hope in the living God, who is the savior of all people.” First and foremost, then, Christian ministry is connected to and compelled by the ministry of Christ and the activity of the living God. And that point of connection is a common purpose—the salvation of others, dare we say with Paul, the salvation of all.

But there are other areas of overlap between our Master and our ministry that reach beyond our common purpose. The letter’s signature itself (1:1) affirms that the *commission* to ministry has its source in Christ and that we minister at the behest of Christ—“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.” Paul was an emissary who belonged to his “emperor,” he was an ambassador under orders from his overlord.

The *content* of Timothy’s ministry was precisely that “healthy teaching,” which conforms to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ (1:10-11, 6:3). According to 1:12, the *confirmation* of ministry comes in Christ: “I give thanks to the one who empowers me, Jesus Christ our Lord, because he considered me faithful, having placed me into ministry.” So the object of our thanks for the privilege of ministry is Christ, the source of our strength for ministry is Christ, and the one who has called us into our ministry is Christ.

In 1:16, Paul announces the reason why God showed him mercy: “... in order that in me first Christ Jesus might demonstrate all his longsuffering, as an example to those people who would come to believe in him [that is, Christ] resulting in eternal life.” In other words Paul saw his ministry as an *example* not of his own longsuffering but of the longsuffering of Christ. He saw his ministry not only as an example for the ministry of others, like Timothy, but as an example of the ministry of Christ.

**The very purpose for which Christ came into the world was to save sinners.**

Paul returns to a discussion of his ministerial *roles* in 2:7. He was appointed as a herald and an apostle and a teacher of the nations, a description that follows hard on the Christological statement in 2:5-6: “for there is one God and one mediator between God and humans, the human Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all humans.” As important as this statement itself is the connection to Paul’s ministerial roles that stands out. Paul was a herald insofar as the message he preached was the good news of Christ. He was an apostle insofar as the edict of redemption he delivered announced ransom by Christ. And he was a teacher to the nations insofar as he conveyed lessons about the mediating ministry of Christ.

It was not only Paul’s apostolic ministry that flowed from Christ. The ministry of the designated servants we call deacons occurred in the *context* of faith in Christ—“those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” (3:13). In fact the *conduct* of the life and ministry of all Christians in the household of God was based on the mystery of the incarnate Christ (3:15-16).

More fundamentally yet, Christ provides the *identity* of the minister. Timothy was, according to 4:6, the servant of Christ, ministering under the mastery of Christ. Paul’s admonitions to Timothy regarding his ministerial responsibilities flowed not so much from Paul’s mentorship but from Christ’s mastery over his life and ministry (5:21). His challenge to Timothy to hold fast to the commandment (that is, his call to ministry<sup>15</sup>) came in the context of the first coming of Jesus Christ, at his faithful and fateful witness before Pontius Pilate, and in the context of the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ at his appearing (6:14).

### CONCLUSION: MINISTERING IN THE MYSTERY

So every aspect of Christian ministry—from the original call to the content and conduct of ministry to the context in which we minister—is founded and focused on Christ. And that is as it must be. Every aspect of the Christian life is founded and focused on Christ. The question, “How must we minister in the household of God?” is firmly rooted in the broader question, “How must we live in the household of God?” (3:15-16). And the answer of course is the same. We live within the mystery. We minister in the mystery. We live out of the good news of the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and appearing of Christ. We minister as we live—in the Lord.

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### END NOTES

- 1 For instance, Fred Gealy’s lengthy and elaborate summary of the themes in the Pastorals, including the section on the “Form and Content of Doctrine,” barely mentions the person and work of God or Jesus Christ. “The First and Second Epistles to Timothy,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 11 (New York: Abingdon, 1955).
- 2 See, for example, the very fine commentaries by George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) and Gordon Fee, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988).
- 3 Ralph Earle, “1 Timothy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 11, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 345.
- 4 Gealy, 364.
- 5 A notable exception is Jerry L. Sumney’s fine essay on the theology of 1 Timothy: “‘God our Savior’: The Fundamental Operational Theological Assertion of 1 Timothy,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2, no. 1 (1999): 105-123.
- 6 Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 9.
- 7 David MacLeod, “Christology in Six Lines: An Exposition of 1 Timothy 3:16,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 635 (2002): 334-348.
- 8 See MacLeod, 334-348, for the rationale for this interpretation of the six statements in 3:16.
- 9 Guthrie, 47-48.
- 10 Ronald A. Nash, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1974), 15.
- 11 Knight, 90.
- 12 Although one relatively recent article (Stanley E. Porter, “What does it mean to be ‘Saved by childbirth’ (1 Timothy 2:15)?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 49, no. 01 (1993): 87-102) argues against an “overly theologized”



interpretation of “through the childbearing,” I find the connection to the birth of Christ compelling. Porter’s argument is weakened by his assumption that “she will be saved” must refer to spiritual not physical deliverance. Why would we not see that as an “overly theological” interpretation?

- 13 Sumney’s insightful article (119) makes an important connection between Christology and ecclesiology and between Christology and Christian conduct. I have chosen to highlight the connection between Christology and Christian ministry.
- 14 “To this end (*eis touto*) is neuter and cannot refer specifically to any noun in the previous two verses. The end or goal must therefore be the offering of life in Christ to men [sic] –the work of evangelism,” Ronald A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Waco: Word, 1974), 73. Life in the present age “refers to the promise of salvation that resulted from Christ’s first appearing, that is, his birth, ministry, death and resurrection,” Mark J. Goodwin, “The Pauline Background of the Living God as Interpretive Context for 1 Timothy 4.10,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 61, no. 1 (1996): 68.
- 15 Knight, 266-268, has a good summary of the discussion over whether “command” here refers to Timothy’s baptismal admonitions or his ordination admonitions; although I disagree with his preference for the former. I lean toward a clear connection to Timothy’s ministry rather than his life in general (see Fee, 151-152).

