

The Recipients and Major Themes of the Pastoral Epistles

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Introduction

Three of the letters contained in the New Testament written by the Apostle Paul are pastoral in nature and were addressed to fellow co-workers. Consequently these letters of First and Second Timothy and Titus are referred to as the “Pastoral Epistles”. What kind of information or instructions did Paul send in these letters? What do we know of their recipients? This essay will address these questions.

Timothy

Both Timothy and Titus were co-workers with Paul during some of his missionary journeys. Paul met Timothy during his second missionary journey in the region of Galatia. He had a good reputation among those who knew him (Acts 16:1). Being the son of a Jewish mother, he was considered a Jew and had been raised with a knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures from early childhood (1 Tim. 3:15). Because he had not previously been circumcised, Paul had him circumcised so he could more effectively minister among other Jews (Acts 16:3). From that time he began traveling with Paul and Silas.

Paul felt comfortable enough with Timothy and his ability to teach that he was able to send him to different places as his representative. He sent him to Macedonia (Acts 19:22) and later to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17). Timothy even co-authored a number of letters with Paul, such as Second Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Thessalonians, and Philemon. We know that at times Timothy preached with Paul, such as was the case in Corinth (2 Cor. 1:19). Not only was he able to preach with Paul, but Timothy was a person that had deep concern for others and for the churches of Christ. Paul told the Philippians that Timothy was “genuinely concerned for your welfare” (Phil. 2:20). Paul referred to Timothy as both a ‘co-worker’ (Rom. 16:21) and a “brother” (1 Thess. 3:2). Furthermore, Timothy seems to have been very close to Paul

emotionally. Paul addresses him as a “loyal child in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2) and tells the Philippians that Timothy had served with him “like a son with his father” (Phil. 2:22).

Titus

Unlike Timothy, Titus was of Greek nationality. Not much is known of his early background. Although Paul also referred to Titus as a partner and co-worker (2 Cor. 8:23) and addressed him as “my loyal child in the faith” (Titus 1:4), the New Testament does not record him playing as large of a role in Paul’s ministry or journeys; he is not even mentioned in the book of Acts. However he did play a major part in Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian believers. Paul said that Titus had the same care in his heart for the Corinthians as Paul himself had (2 Cor. 8:15). Paul sent him to Corinth as his representative and courier to relay Paul’s feelings and concerns (2 Cor 2:13; 7:6-14; 12:18). He also helped to collect money from the Corinthians in the offering for the church in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:4). At one point he accompanied Paul and Barnabas in their important mission to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1).

Themes of the Pastoral Epistles

The tenor of the Pastoral Epistles is parenetic in nature. They contain exhortations from Paul to Timothy and Titus regarding how they are to act and what they are to preach. But the topics contained in these letters can generally be classified into three major themes. Paul instructs them concerning sound doctrine, Christian conduct, and the proper order and structure of church leadership. These topics are all closely related to one another. Proper doctrine is of such a nature as to encourage godly living (1 Tim. 6:3; Titus 1:1). The qualifications of being a leader in the church have to do with speaking healthy words and living a proper life, full of good works (1 Tim. 3:1-10).

Sound Doctrine

These letters have many references to sound doctrine (also be referred to as “healthy teaching”), which Timothy and Titus are to teach and preach (1 Tim. 1:3-4; 4:6; 2 Tim. 1:13; Titus 2:1). They are also instructed to not get involved in vain disputes about the Jewish Law or other speculations (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:14, 16-18; Titus 1:14). They are to instruct others to only teach sound doctrine and teaching that produces godliness (1 Tim. 6:3; Titus 1:1). Furthermore, they are to silence and expose the deceptive teaching of insubordinate people (Titus 1:10-13).

Christian Conduct

Much of Paul’s exhortation concerns the proper conduct and godly living of Christians. In each of these letters there are instructions about the importance of proper living and about how good works are a validation of the truth of the gospel (1 Tim. 5:7; Titus 2:5,8,10). He gives directions to the older men, the older women, young men, young women, and slaves (1 Tim. 2:8-10; 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-10). He instructs all Christians that they should be eager to perform good works (1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10; 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:21; 3:17; Titus 2:7; 2:14; 3:1,8,14). He instructs his younger co-workers that they themselves should be models of proper conduct in both speech and actions (1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 2:7).

Church Order

Besides proper doctrine and Christian conduct, these letters also contain many instructions for setting up proper leadership in the church. Paul says that there should be elders appointed in every church (Titus 1:5) and spends much time describing the characteristics that would qualify a person to be a church leader (1 Tim. 3:1-10; Titus 1:6-9). They should be able to teach others and contradict false teaching (2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9). They should have an upstanding and

unreproachable character and have a good testimony from others so as not to undermine the true teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Tim 3:7; Titus 2:8).