

01. Introduction to Paul's First Letter to Timothy



We first hear of Timothy when, after the Jerusalem Assembly Paul and Silas return to Southern Galatia.

Acts 16:1-3

‘Paul went on to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.’



Timothy accompanied Paul to Macedonia, to Philippi.
Thessalonica and Beroea



When the situation became too dangerous, Paul was sent off to Athens, and then to Corinth. Timothy stayed behind. He joined Paul in Corinth with news from Thessalonica. This led to Paul's Letters from Corinth to Thessalonica.

Paul was in Ephesus for three years (52-55). Timothy was with him. In a letter written to Corinth from Ephesus, Paul writes: 'I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church' (1 Corinthians 4:17).

'If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am' (1 Corinthians 16:10).

In his Letter to the Colossians, also probably written from Ephesus, Paul writes: 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in the Messiah in Colossae' (Colossians 1:1)

Timothy is also mentioned in a personal Letter to Philemon sent along with the Letter to Colossae: 'Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker' (Philemon verse 1).

When Paul discerned that it was nearing time to leave Ephesus 'he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia' (Acts 19:22).

It was from Macedonia that Paul wrote his Second Letter to the Corinthians. The Letter opens with the words: 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia' (2 Corinthians 1:1).

Timothy was with Paul in Corinth in the winter of 56-57. Paul composed his Letter to the Romans there and concludes: 'Timothy, my co-worker, greets you' (Romans 16:21).

Paul went from Corinth to Jerusalem. His enemies tried to kill him. He spent two years under house arrest in Caesarea. He then claimed his right as a Roman citizen to be judged by the Emperor. He was taken by ship to Rome where he spent two more years under house arrest awaiting trial.

The last words of the Acts

‘Paul lived in Rome two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance’ (Acts 28:30-31).

It was probably during these two years that Paul wrote to the community in Philippi. The opening words are: 'Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus' (Philippians 1:1). He goes on to write: 'I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you' (Philippians 2:19).

Author of the First Letter to Timothy

The author introduces himself as Paul and there is no evidence from the early church or, indeed, for the first eighteen hundred years of the church's life, of any dispute about the identity of the author. However, modern critical scholarship has brought us to the situation today in which most scholars either argue or assume that someone other than Paul composed the First Letter to Timothy in his name. They have the same opinion about the author of the other two so-called Pastoral Letters (Second Timothy and Titus).

There is nothing inherently problematic about this suggestion provided it is understood that this was the way which a faithful disciple of Paul chose to convey what he understood to be Paul's authentic thoughts about church organisation and government and about what was important in the life of the communities to whom this letter is addressed. In keeping with the practice of the times, it is possible that a disciple of Paul wrote in Paul's name in order to remind people that the martyred Paul was still present among them, inspiring them by his teaching and active in the life of the church.

However, after two hundred years of scholarly debate, some scholars continue to argue that Paul is, in fact, the author. First, nothing in what is written requires a situation significantly different in time from the period just before Paul's death. Secondly, a number of considerations favour this time rather than late in the century. The stress placed on the authority of Paul's representative indicates a less developed stage of local leadership than we find, for example, in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch, composed in the early years of the second century.

The content could have been written in the mid-sixties and could have been written to Ephesus as the letter claims. If it can be established by other criteria that someone else composed the letter, the above considerations point to its author writing soon after Paul's death.

Still focusing on the content, we ask a second question: Could what is said have been said by Paul, or does it reveal an author with different ideas, different values, different concerns? The fact that the Letter to Timothy was accepted for so long as being written by Paul is itself an indication that it not only does not contradict Paul's thought, but that it has been read as being consistent with it.

It has a special and limited focus and aim. It is written to a church leader precisely in his role as pastor. It contains advice and instruction about the responsibility of Paul's representative in his guiding of the community in living a Christian life. Ministry and ethics are central. This focus is adequate explanation for the special content and vocabulary.

Some find it strange that Paul would write to an intimate co-worker in such a relatively impersonal and formal way. We should note, however, that the author clearly intends the letter to be read to the congregations. It functions as a guarantee that Paul stands behind the authority of the leader. It is written to support Timothy and as instruction for those for whom he is exercising care.

Ignatius of Loyola, for example, writes differently when he is sending a personal letter of encouragement to a fellow Jesuit, and when he is writing a rule of life to be followed.

We might assume that most of what Paul writes in this letter was already known by Timothy after years working closely with Paul. He might sound as though he is instructing Timothy, but he is rather instructing the communities to expect this kind of instruction and leadership from him.

In his excellent introduction to the Anchor Bible commentary on Titus (1990), Jerome Quinn writes: 'Titus and Timothy are models of Paul and models for believers as they are designated to carry on the apostle's work, carry out his commands, imitate his sufferings, teach his gospel and practise it themselves, preside at the liturgy, receive material support for their ministerial work, and choose other men who in their turn will share their apostolic ministry' (*The Letter to Titus*, page 15).

If the content is Pauline, what about the style? Could Paul have written in this way? The special vocabulary is not a problem. It is adequately explained by the focus and unique content of the letter. Paul's use of certain technical words that are not in his usual vocabulary can be adequately explained without having recourse to the hypothesis of another author.

Scholars note the lack of many of the connecting particles that we are accustomed to find in Paul's writing. However, this, too, can be explained by the focus of the letter. In his other letters which are written to communities, Paul is often arguing certain points. This is not the case here. Timothy knows why Paul is insisting on certain things. Paul's purpose is to state what is to be done in acting decisively to strengthen the communities of Ephesus against divisive ideas that are undermining the gospel. There is no need for the many particles that would have been needed in the cut and thrust of argument.

Paul is laying down policy concerning government to ensure a continuance of the kind of authority that is needed when he himself is no longer around. One would expect a certain impersonality, a certain formality, a certain lack of spontaneity as he expresses principles to which he has given much thought. It is unusual for Paul to put so much stress on tradition, rather than on his own divine commission. Perhaps, knowing that he will not be with them much longer (for reasons of age, health, threat to his life), he purposely stresses tradition which will still be there when he is gone, and which is not dependent on his personal presence.

If the scholars who assign this letter to a disciple rather than to Paul are correct, we must not forget that it was the author's intention that those reading the letter would do so as though they were listening to Paul himself. The intention was to reproduce what Paul himself would have said were he still alive. We should remember that this is how this letter was read, and why it was preserved, treasured, copied and distributed. This is how it has been read down through the centuries.

In it we hear Paul's concern that Christians in the various communities, Jewish and Gentile, remain in communion by being faithful to the tradition which they have received.

In it we hear his concern that they remain in communion with other Christians by their love and by maintaining unity in the church.

In it we hear his concern that they remain in communion as they hold firm to the gospel in the hope of sharing Jesus' eternal communion with God in the glory that awaits them.

Perhaps the strongest call that we hear is that Christians continue the mission of proclaiming the gospel to the world, for, as he states clearly in this Letter, Paul is passionately convinced that ‘God wills every person to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4). It is for this reason that he seeks to support the authority of Timothy the leader against false teaching that could undermine this mission.

While accepting that the First Letter to Timothy may well have been composed by a disciple of Paul, I have not found their arguments conclusive and so prefer to stay with the tradition that Paul himself was the author.

If in fact Paul is the author, it is necessary to accept the tradition that Paul was released from house arrest in Rome at the end of the statutory two years, and that he returned east. He expressed the hope that this would happen in his Letter to the Philippians, composed probably while in house arrest in Rome. While back in the east, Paul wrote this Letter to Timothy before he was once again taken to Rome, imprisoned and martyred.

Eusebius, writing in the opening years of the fourth century, has this to say: 'After defending himself, the Apostle was again sent on the ministry of preaching, and coming a second time to the same city suffered martyrdom under Nero' (*History of the Church*, 2.22).

65AD

First Letter to Timothy
(from Macedonia to
Ephesus)

(To older, mainly
Gentile, communities
in 'Asia')

