

# 1 Timothy 1:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     1 Timothy chapter 1, verses 1 to 17. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by command of God our Saviour, and of Christ Jesus our hope.

To Timothy, my true child in the faith, grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus, so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

[ 2 : 1 2 ]     To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. The book of 1 Timothy is the first of what have been called the pastoral epistles, including 1 and 2 Timothy and the book of Titus. The status of these books has been considerably debated. Some have argued that they are second-century texts, what are called pseudepigraphical texts, presenting themselves as being written by the apostle, but actually written by other hands.

Various arguments have been advanced for this position. Some have argued that after the second coming failed to occur in the first century, there was a need for a more accommodated Christianity for the longer term, and the pastoral epistles answer to something of this concern.

They address structures of church leadership, which are largely absent in the undisputed Pauline texts. Dugentile issues are no longer looming in the same way in the background. The style of the letters also seem to differ quite considerably from that of the undisputed Pauline texts. And besides this, there is the challenge of fitting them into the chronology that we know of Paul from the book of Acts and his other epistles. Many of the challenges to Pauline authorship rest upon questionable theological prejudices. The assumption, for instance, that the apostolic church was a far less organised body, with more charismatic structures of leadership.

Others imagine that some later figure lost the nerve that Paul had in his more radical teaching, retreating to the more patriarchal form of society that we see in chapter 2. Many of these sorts of challenges can be answered by showing the consistency between Paul's teaching in the books of Timothy and Titus, and the teaching that we find elsewhere in the Pauline epistles and in the book of Acts. The claim that it is a late text, and the fact that it is absent from Marcion's canon, can be addressed by recognising that Marcion may have had motivations for leaving it out of his canon, which had more to do with his heretical convictions than with strong arguments against the authenticity of the pastoral epistles. Besides this, the pastoral epistles are recognised as genuine Pauline epistles from at least the beginning of the 2nd century. The fact that they are cited by various people and attributed to Paul leaves those disputing Pauline authorship with the challenge of explaining why they became so widely accepted from so very early on.

Various responses have been given to the challenge of contrasting styles between the pastoral epistles and the undisputed Pauline texts. It is worth bearing in mind, for instance, the fact that various other hands were involved in the writing of the Pauline epistles. All scholars accept, for instance, the role of an amanuensis in the writing of many of Paul's epistles, then there is the consideration of co-authors in a number of cases. In reference to the pastoral epistles, I, Howard Marshall, has raised the possibility of what he calls allonymity, another hand gathering together, organising and editing genuine Pauline material into these letters. If we accept, as I believe we should, that the apostle Paul was the author of the pastoral epistles, we are left with a number of challenges, one of them being the question of where to fit these in within Paul's ministry as we can piece it together from various other sources, particularly the book of Acts. Philip Towner suggests that one of the most promising junctures is that found in Acts chapter 20 verses 1 to 3. After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews, as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. I think Towner is right to identify this brief window of time as the most likely period for the writing of 1 Timothy. The epistle of 1 Timothy begins with a characteristically

[ 6 : 01 ] Pauline introduction. Paul introduces himself and declares his commission. He is an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope. The letter is addressed to Timothy, Paul's true child in the faith. Paul first encountered Timothy at Lystra. He was held in high esteem by the Christians in the region. He was the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father.

This would likely have provoked some disapproval in some more observant Jewish quarters, although many of the Jews would have been more relaxed about it. The problem was not chiefly an ethnic one, but a religious one. Intermarriage with people outside of the covenant was seen as a very serious matter in many parts of the Old Testament. In 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 5, we learn that both Timothy's mother and grandmother were faithful persons, and that he was taught the scriptures from a young age, so we should not suppose that Timothy's mother was indifferent towards her Jewish faith.

We can speculate over whether or not Timothy's father was a God-fearer associated with the synagogue. However, the fact that Timothy had not been circumcised raises the possibility that his mother's marriage was less than ideal. Perhaps it was arranged by an unbelieving father. Timothy's religious status would have seemed rather ambiguous, and perhaps a cause of scandal to some people.

Timothy himself is a living example of a Jew-Gentile union. And considering the obstacle that Timothy's ambiguous status might provide for the mission, Paul had determined it was best to circumcise him.

This presumably was undertaken for the cause of the mission, so that Timothy would be more effective in Jewish contexts. In circumcising Timothy, Paul played the part of a father to him.

[ 7 : 39 ] Timothy would come to be immensely important in Paul's later ministry. He served as Paul's personal representative. Timothy is Paul's sheliach, the one who personally represents Paul where Paul himself could not be. As such, Timothy participated in the exercise of Paul's apostolic ministry.

He was the co-author of a number of epistles, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Philemon. He was Paul's personal emissary, as we see in Acts chapter 19 verse 22, and here in 1 Timothy. He also served Paul so that Paul could give himself to his primary task of preaching without any distraction, as we see in Acts chapter 18 verses 1 to 5. Paul and Timothy were a pair, bound together in a single apostolic mission. On occasions, the distinction between them is made plain. Only Paul is the apostle proper, while on other occasions their alignment is stressed.

Timothy is a co-worker, a helper, a sharer in Paul's calling. Relative to the churches to which they were ministering, Timothy was to be treated as a bearer of Paul's own authority. However, relative to Paul, Timothy was a subordinate. He was without an independent commission of his own. He rather shared in Paul's. The relationship between Paul and Timothy is exceptionally close, and Paul speaks of Timothy as his son, his child in the gospel. The language is not merely that of emotional closeness, but of representation. The son represents the father, his authority, his presence, and his interests.

Such father-son language also points to a relationship similar to that which pertained between Old Testament leaders and prophets and their shaliachs. In Numbers chapter 13 verse 16, we see that Joshua's name was given to him by Moses, who also laid his hands on Joshua in Deuteronomy chapter 34 verse 9. A similar relationship existed between Elijah and Elisha. Elisha received a double portion of Elijah's spirit, the inheritance that was appropriate to the firstborn. And as Elijah was taken into heaven, Elisha addressed him as his father. Matthew Colvin observes, that Timothy is a virtual copy of Paul is underlined by 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 16 to 17. I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. The charge to imitate Paul is accompanied by the sending of Timothy toward the fulfilment of this end, as the son is the preeminent imitator and representation of the father. As a participant in his father's ministry, and as Paul's right-hand man,

Timothy had immense authority to wield, even being given the commission to choose and appoint church officers as Paul's representative. As the apostolic ministry was temporary, upon Paul's death, Timothy would likely have ceased to be the apostle's apostle, and would presumably have become a bishop, or occupied some other similar position within the early church. The greeting that Paul gives to Timothy here is grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Throughout the Pauline corpus, we see that the terms grace, mercy, and peace are theologically freighted terms. They bear the greatest weight of meaning. This is not just a throwaway greeting, but is a communication of the full wealth of the blessings that are given to us in the gospel. This epistle is sent to Timothy to confirm him in an existing commission. While going on to Macedonia, Paul had commissioned Timothy to remain at Ephesus and deal with some issues in the church there. As I've suggested earlier, this was most likely at the beginning of Acts chapter 20. Ephesus was a sizable city, probably larger than Corinth, perhaps even the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire. Paul first visited there in Acts chapter 18.

[ 11 : 28 ] There were certain troublemakers in the church at Ephesus. They seemed to have been teachers teaching false doctrine, a teaching based upon speculation and esoteric texts and beliefs, rather than upon the clarity of the gospel message and the faith that corresponds to that. Timothy and Paul had the task of stewardship in the household of God, and the proper behavior of people within the household of faith was threatened by such speculative doctrines. The source of the speculative doctrines in question seemed to have been Jewish myths and fables. The endless genealogies referred to suggest that some of the material might have arisen from speculative Jewish texts about people before the flood, for instance.

Such material can be read with interest, but it mostly produces dubious lines of reasoning, rather than the certainty and the clarity of true faith. There are definitely interesting features to be pursued in the shadowy corners of the biblical text. And even in the penumbra of extra-canonical Jewish literature, there are many worthwhile things to be read. However, this is certainly not where our faith is founded. Our faith must rest upon the clear revealed things of God, and the more that we abandon that clarity for speculations and fables, the more we are in danger of undermining our own and other people's faith. The center of gravity of Christian teaching is in clearly revealed things, things that any careful reader of scripture should be able to see. These things encourage faith, which is based upon the surety and the clarity of truth. Myths and speculations cannot provide a sure foundation for such faith. Such true faith gives rise to a genuine love. The conscience and the heart that have been purified by faith and the work of the Holy Spirit yield love towards God and his people that fulfills the law. Meanwhile, those who have abandoned the clarity of the word of God in the gospel, and implicitly the faith and love that correspond to that, have given themselves to interminable vain discussion.

Empty speculations about the law. They fancy themselves to be teachers of the law, but they don't have a clue what they're talking about. Paul here might be speaking not just as a Christian apostle, but also as someone who was advanced in the knowledge of the law more than any of his contemporaries. Paul was enough of an actual expert in the law to recognize the dabblers when he saw them. The law is fulfilled in love that proceeds from a true faith that responds to the clarity of the gospel. Paul writes in Romans chapter 13 verses 8 to 10, Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

The law, Paul stresses here, is good, but it needs to be used in the right way. The law is primarily for the condemning and the exposure of sin, and as such it's not primarily for the just, but for rebels and sinners. Paul lists a number of figures for which the law is written in verses 9 to 10, and we can see he loosely follows the order of the Ten Commandments, the lawless, disobedient, ungodly, sinners, unholy and profane, refer to the first four commandments.

Then there are those who strike their fathers and mothers, which relates to the fifth, those who are murderers, the sixth, the sexually immoral and men who practice homosexuality, the seventh, enslavers, you shall not steal, the eighth, liars and perjurers, the ninth. There is no explicit allusion to the tenth.

[ 15 : 03 ] Elsewhere in Romans, Paul talked about the tenth commandment as that which exposed sin to him. The tenth commandment, which reveals the problem of the heart, is also the negative commandment that most clearly corresponds to the positive injunction by which the law is fulfilled, loving your neighbor as yourself. The law, for Paul, represents the sort of negative space around the positive space of the gospel message. The law is concerned with ruling out and identifying everything that is contrary to sound doctrine. However, the positive message of the sound doctrine is found in the gospel of the glory of the blessed God. The gospel is that in which God's actual glory is revealed. In these verses, Paul makes a lot of use of faith-related words. The word entrusted in verse 11, the word faithful in verse 12, the word faith in verse 14, the word trustworthy in verse 15 and the verb to believe in verse 16.

All of these are related in the Greek. Paul has been commissioned as one faithful to bear the gospel. The faithfulness of Paul here should be considered as the effectiveness of Christ through him.

And the contrast between the former Paul, Saul of Tarsus, prior to his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, and Paul the Apostle, is a stark one. It presents Paul himself as a worked example of Christ's grace in the gospel. Paul both bears the message and represents the message in himself.

As a recipient of such extreme mercy, he is well placed to declare that mercy to others, and also to provide an image of what that mercy is like in practice. He presents himself as the foremost of sinners. But as the foremost of the sinners, he is being made an example of the extent of Christ's salvation. If the foremost of the sinners, a violent man who persecuted the church, can be saved, then there is no reason why anyone else can't be. Paul's personal testimony is thoroughly bound up with his broader message of the gospel. Paul concludes this section with a doxology proclaiming God's reign, the fact that he is the immortal creator beyond human vision, the only God who dwells in unapproachable light, and one who will receive honor and glory throughout all generations. From a declaration of what God has done in history, and most particularly in his own life, the Apostle moves quite seamlessly to a proclamation of God's eternal glory.

A question to consider. Paul's personal testimony here is very naturally connected to his proclamation of the gospel more generally. How can we tell our testimonies in a way that connects them more fully with the great story of God's work in Christ and history?