

1 TIMOTHY: Pastor's Primer

by Ray C. Stedman

While Second Timothy represents the last word we have from the pen of the Apostle Paul, First Timothy was written a few years earlier, probably immediately after the apostle had been imprisoned in Rome for the first time. After he was released, he wrote this letter to the young man whom he had won to Christ years before when he was preaching in Timothy's home town of Lystra. Timothy was probably no more than sixteen years old at the time. He accompanied Paul on his second journey and was a faithful minister and son-in-the-faith with the apostle for the rest of his life.

This is one of three "pastoral letters" in the New Testament -- letters written from a pastor's viewpoint. First and Second Timothy are two of them, and Titus is the third. In these letters, we have very intimate words from the apostle to these young men who frequently accompanied him on his journeys. I have often suspected that some of the young men who were with Paul were once members of the palace guard of the Emperor Nero. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us that the gospel was reaching the palace guard, and that many of them were being brought to Christ.

But this letter was to Timothy, who by this time had served as a son in the gospel with the apostle for several years. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties, and the apostle had sent him to Ephesus, the great commercial and pleasure resort on the shores of the Mediterranean in Asia Minor.

Both of these letters to Timothy reflect more than just a father-son relationship; although they have intimate remarks in them, nevertheless each one of them begins with these words:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope. {1 Tim 1:1 RSV}

The apostle felt it necessary, even in writing to his own son in the faith, to remind him that he was an apostle. Now surely Timothy did not need this reminder himself; he knew Paul's position well, but perhaps the apostle knew that these letters would have a wider readership than to Timothy alone. His previous letters had frequently been circulated widely among the churches.

It is therefore with the authority of an apostle that Paul begins these two letters, and what he has to say has meaning and authority in all the churches in Christendom. As we recognize that, we must take these words as having the same kind of authority for us as does every one of the other letters.

The apostles were men with a peculiar and unique ministry. Every now and then someone will refer to Paul in a disparaging way. Even Christians will sometimes say, "Well, you know, Paul wrote some things that we cannot take as authoritative. He was a confirmed old bachelor, and what he said about women is not really significant." But this is really to deny the apostolic office and to refuse the authority that the Lord Jesus gave his apostles. This is the mark of an apostle -- that they were commissioned by the Lord himself, and given the task of speaking authoritatively in every area of doctrine or practice, whatever it may be.

This first letter has to do with the ministry of the church itself -- its character and its nature, its function in the world. The second letter centers around the message that it has to convey -- the great theme is the gospel, and Timothy's relationship to that gospel.

There are two themes intermingled throughout this first letter. The one we will look at first is in chapter three, where the apostle says:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you 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 3:14-15 RSV}

Now when he talks about behaving in church, he is talking about the church not as buildings, but as people. One of the great weaknesses of the present-day evangelical life is that we still think so much of the church as a building, but the church is people, not buildings. And it was the concern of the apostle as he wrote to young Timothy that he would know how to conduct himself in the ministry and the relationships of the body of Christ, the church of the living God.

Then the second theme is found in the first chapter, where we are told,

...the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. {1 Tim 1:5 RSV}

This is more personal. While the first theme is that of the church and its ministry, the second theme concerns the individual's relationship to the world and to God. As the apostle puts it, it is to be "love that issues from a pure hearts and a good conscience and sincere faith."

Now in the realm of actual experience, we begin with the last of these -- sincere faith. That is the way you come into the Christian life; by believing the Word of God, and exercising faith in what he says. And that will lead you to a good conscience, derived from obeying the word. This is to be the mark of every Christian -- that we obey what we believe.

And that, in turn, will result in a pure heart -- actually, a purified heart. None of us has a pure heart by birth; we need to be cleansed, purified by the washing of the Word of God and the cleansing of the blood of Christ. But if we have a good conscience about our faith, it will result in a pure heart, and from that pure heart will flow an unceasing stream of love.

The letter itself falls into two major divisions; the first chapter, and the last five. In the first division we have the background of Paul's charge to his son Timothy. Remember that Timothy was in Ephesus, a city given over largely to the worship of a heathen goddess, Diana (also called Artemis), the love-goddess of the Greek world. It was Timothy's task to minister to the church that was opposing the blind idolatry, and pagan superstition of this darkened, heathen city -- a formidable task.

So the first note that the apostle strikes is that Timothy is to oppose false teaching. This indicates that by now the church has begun to be infiltrated by false teachers; the early church had its share of heretics, as does the church of today. And Timothy is warned against them. He says, "I left you there,

... that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; {1 Tim 1:3-4 RSV}

And then he goes on to say that one of the things that was causing problems in the church was the wrong understanding of the law. There were those who were trying to regulate people's conduct by imposing rigid regulations, to be carried through to the letter, without any understanding of the control of the indwelling life and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the wrong use of the law.

The law, he says, is intended for a specific purpose (and by the way, this is one of the best passages I know of to counteract the popular theory that it is perfectly proper to disregard the law, and that we can resist certain regulations or deny them, in the name of God). Paul says that the law is given, "for the lawless and disobedient" {1 Tim 1:9b RSV}, and he lists these: "the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers...immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers" {1 Tim 1:9c-10a RSV}, and so forth. But if you have come to Christ, and your heart is intent upon pleasing him, you do not need the law to keep you from doing wrong -- love will do it! But only remember that love is interpreted by the law; we understand what love is only when we see it spelled out for us in terms of the law: thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal -- these are ways of describing how love acts.

Then, the second reason Paul has for charging Timothy is his own experience of grace. Paul never forgot that he had been a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insulter of Christ. But God met him, forgave him, delivered

him, and every now and then Paul breaks into a lyrical passage, like a spring of water that cannot be stopped up, expressing his love and excitement and thankfulness for the work that God has done in his life.

The rest of the letter is made up of the charge itself that the apostle has for his young son in the faith, consisting of five elements. First, there are certain instructions on conducting public worship, differentiating between the activities of men and those of women. Men, he says, are to lead out in prayer -- praying for kings and for those in authority -- so that we might live in peace and godliness. Then he turns to the women, and if we read this a little differently, we will understand what the apostle is saying:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; also that women should [pray] adorn themselves modestly ... {1 Tim 2:8-9a RSV}

The thought of the apostle is that women have the right to minister and pray in public as well as men, although some have misunderstood this passage. But he does include a restriction a little later:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. {1 Tim 2:11-12 RSV}

In the congregation, the idea is that women are not to teach men authoritatively. They are not to be the final word in that church as to doctrine or teaching. The apostle did not permit that, and he gives two reasons. First, he says, "Adam was formed first, then Eve" {1 Tim 2:13 RSV}, and, second, "the woman was deceived" {1 Tim 2:14b RSV}, and therefore fell into transgression. It is interesting to note that Eve's sin was primarily that of trying to arrive at a theological conclusion apart from the counsel of her husband.

But the apostle goes on to show that women have a wonderful ministry, in a verse that has been somewhat garbled in translation, and greatly misunderstood:

Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she [literally, "if they," the children] continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. {1 Tim 2:15 RSV}

Now what does he mean? Women shall be saved through bearing children? I must confess I have struggled long with this passage. There are three major interpretations of it, and I have been an adherent of all three at one time or another. But now, I think they are all wrong! I really believe we have a clue to the meaning of this troublesome passage in the fourth chapter where the apostle says to young Timothy,

Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. {1 Tim 4:16 RSV}

What does he mean here by "save"? Timothy was already saved; he had been a Christian for many years. And certainly other people were not saved by Timothy's obeying the truth. What does he mean, then? A resolution appears when we see that he is using the word "salvation" in a different sense than we normally think of it, and it appears in several places in Scripture in this way. Salvation here means the solution to a problem. The word is also used this way in Philippians, where it says "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" {Phil 2:12b RSV}-- work out the solutions to the problems you confront with fear and trembling, because it is God who works in you both the will and the doing of his good pleasure, {cf, Phil 2:13 RSV}. So here the meaning is that woman "will be saved," in the sense that her desire for a ministry will be fulfilled -- that problems will be resolved -- through child bearing, if the children continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Now the apostle turns to the qualifications of church leaders, who fall into two major categories -- the bishops (elders) and the deacons. Deacons and deaconesses are any who do a special task for the whole church, such as teaching Sunday school. Those who represent the church in any outreach ministry are also deacons. And he says three things, first, about the elders.

They are to be "blameless," so as to avoid being disapproved or set aside. Paul himself speaks of the

possibility in his own life when he says, "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified," {1 Cor 9:27 RSV}

Second, they are to be pure; that is, they are to be men who understand how to tell the difference between good and evil, and how to apply the word so that it produces righteousness. And Paul gives this requirement of purity so as to avoid pride. The great risk in using an immature person is that he may be lifted up with pride, thus falling into the trap of the devil; pride is always a trap. Third, these men were to be of good repute, to avoid public scandal which would bring the whole ministry of the church into disgrace.

Now deacons are treated somewhat similarly, but he adds one major instruction concerning them -- they are first to be tested, to be given work to do on a trial basis {cf, 1 Tim 3:10 RSV}. If they perform it well, they are recognized as men and women who can be trusted with responsibility in the work of the church.

The importance of this charge is that it all relates to the fact that the church is linked with the mystery of Christ. Christ is the greatest figure in the universe -- everything relates to him -- and Paul uses a first century hymn to set forth what he means:

**He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. {1 Tim 3:16b RSV}**

That is why this charge is so important; these words must be taken with utmost seriousness because they link to this One who is the center of the universe.

In chapter four, quite appropriately, Paul turns to the subject of apostasy. Now apostates and heretics are different. A heretic is a Christian, one who basically accepts and knows the Lord Jesus Christ, but who tends to go wrong in some particular doctrinal issue. But an apostate has never been a Christian, although he testifies that he is. As John tells us in his first letter, "they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us they would have continued with us;" {1 Jn 2:19a RSV}.

The Lord Jesus had told of the sower who went out to sow the good seed of the kingdom, and of the enemy sowing weeds in his way. And Jesus said these would grow up together until the harvest {cf, Matt 13:30}, which is why we will never get rid of the apostates within the church. Apostate attitudes arise from listening to doctrines of demons, of deceitful spirits -- not merely from twisted ideas of men, but from deliberately deceitful ideas of wicked spirits who attempt to lead people astray.

Then, in the following verses, Paul says that until their apostasy becomes very, very evident, Timothy is not to excommunicate them. First, he is to inform the congregation about the truth. Second, he is to set the example for them in his own personal life: and, third, he is to expound the Scriptures to them:

Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift ... which was given you by prophetic utterance ... {1 Tim 4:13-14a RSV}

This is the guarantee against apostasy -- informing the congregation of the dangers, setting the example, and expounding the Scriptures.

In chapter five certain specific church problems are discussed, including how to treat younger and older people within the church, and advice to women on various practical matters. Then he takes up the official problem of how to handle charges against the elders. And finally, he mentions certain personal problems that Timothy himself would encounter.

Chapter six goes into the matter of social problems, with a word, first, to the downtrodden and degraded -- the

slaves. This is a most instructive passage, to help answer some of the questions that are being flung at us from every side about how to counsel those who are degraded, and deprived of certain human rights. Paul addresses this to Christian slaves, and he reminds them that the urge to get material things can be a terrible danger to the spiritual life.

Then in a glowing and wonderful passage, he exhorts Timothy to walk honestly and steadfastly in the sight of God until the day when the Lord Jesus himself calls him home. And finally, having begun with the poor, he closes with a word to the rich, and to the learned, giving them their Christian responsibilities. They are rich, he says, because they have been blessed of God in order to help someone else, not to satisfy their own desire. They have a responsibility, he says, "to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life [right now] which is life indeed," {1 Tim 6:18b-19 RSB}.

As he closes, Paul gives Timothy a word of warning to those who trust in human knowledge:

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. {1 Tim 6:20-21 RSV}

What an up-to-date letter this is! How thoroughly it speaks to our own time as well as to this first century. May God grant that we will understand it and live by it.

Prayer:

Grant to us, our Father, that we may take seriously these words from that long-ago first century. We thank you, Lord, that they come with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and are designed for our times as well. Grant that we may saturate ourselves in this wise counsel so that we too may know how to behave ourselves in the church of God, which is the pillar and the ground of the truth. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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