

# The Epistle of First Timothy

## The Epistle of First Timothy: Its Setting

Paul endured *two* imprisonments in Rome. After being released from his *first* imprisonment in AD62-63 (Acts 28.16, 30-31), he continued spreading the gospel in various parts – both east and west. Immediately after his release, Paul likely moved eastwards to Crete (leaving Titus behind, Titus 1.5) before arriving in Ephesus to spend the winter. Early in AD64, Paul left for Macedonia leaving Timothy at Ephesus (1.3). This first letter to Timothy was therefore likely written by Paul from Macedonia (possibly Philippi) in the summer of AD64. Early Christian writers, such as *Clement of Rome*, also write of Paul ‘having gone to the limits of the west’ in the same period (i.e. Spain, cf. Romans 15.24-28).

During Paul’s time in prison, his prophetic word to the Ephesian elders some *six* years previous had come to pass (Acts 20.29-30). ‘Grievous wolves’ had entered from *without* and doctrinally ‘twisted’ men arisen from *within*. Upon his arrival in Ephesus, Paul dealt personally with the ringleaders of the trouble (1.19-20) and stationed Timothy to teach ‘sound doctrine’ to help *repel* the corruption of the false (1.20). Though the letter of First Timothy is *personal*, Paul is also writing *indirectly* to the assembly at Ephesus (hence the *apostolic* greeting and use of the *plural* ‘ye’, 6.21). The letter sought to authorise and encourage Timothy in his responsibility (1.18).

The exact nature of the false teaching is unclear. It may have been a multiplicity of individuals, some with a *Jewish* background being ‘teachers of the law’ (1.7). They promoted ‘myths’ and ‘endless genealogies’ (1.4). Timothy was to *charge* them to ‘teach no other doctrine’ (1.3) and show them the *error* of their teaching (1.8). There may also have been the promotion of *Greek philosophy* (dualism). These individuals assumed matter was evil and therefore advocated *asceticism* (4.3), prohibited *marriage* (4.3) and denied *physical* resurrection (2 Timothy 2.18). Whatever their origin, they certainly viewed their religion and perverted piety as a means to make money (6.5). All in all, the falsehood was Satanic in origin and anticipated the beginning of apostasy that would be fully manifest in ‘the latter times’ (4.1).

## The Epistle of First Timothy: Its Significance and Subject

First Timothy is part of *three* epistles known as the Pastoral Epistles (the others are *Second Timothy* and *Titus*). They were written to *individuals* (not churches) for the purpose of giving practical spiritual guidance in the shepherding of the flock. It is not that Timothy and Titus were *pastors* (or bishops) of the churches in Ephesus and Crete respectively. They held no permanent office in these churches but instead laboured as temporary apostolic representatives (Titus 3.12). Generally speaking, First and Second Timothy emphasise *doctrine*, whereas Titus stresses *good works*. Doctrine cannot dwell alone! It must be *adorned* by doing (Titus 2.10). Healthy teaching begets godliness. *First Timothy* speaks of the precious deposit of divine truth which must be **protected**. In *Second Timothy* the same deposit is **proclaimed** and, in *Titus*, **practiced**. All in all, the Pastoral Epistles might be summarised as follows: *Sound doctrine, applied and promoted by spiritual leadership, produces good works and godliness unto the adorning of the gospel of Christ.*

First Timothy, then, is an apostolic charge to Timothy to ‘guard’ (protect) the precious deposit of truth which Christ had committed to Paul, and likewise, Paul to Timothy (1.18; 6.20; 2 Timothy 1.14). Timothy was to further ‘deposit’ the treasure of truth to other faithful trustees (2 Timothy 2.2). This was a crisis moment. Sadly the ‘some’ of *First Timothy* (cf. 1.6, 19; 5.15; 6.10, 21) become the ‘all’ of *Second Timothy* (1.15; 4.16). A break-down in the communication of *sound doctrine* and resulting *godly living* was underway. How salutary, then, that these *three* pastoral epistles follow *nine* church epistles thus giving a prophetic picture of the decay of organised Christian testimony through the ages.

Great *themes* of the epistle include:

- **Biblical** (sound) doctrine (1.3; 2.7; 6.3). This is set in stark ‘contrast to the religious wishy-washy-ness of the twenty-first century, which will tolerate anything apart from the clear truth of God. Those who cry up love at the expense of doctrine will find the Pastoral Epistles stick in their gullet’ (David Newell). The word ‘sound’ means ‘hygienic’. In contrast to error which ministers envy, strife and corruption, the truth of God brings spiritual *health*, even godliness.
- **Belief** or faith. The epistle places a strong emphasis on ‘the faith’, i.e. the precious deposit of revealed doctrine. As apostasy increased, this was to be ‘gripped’ tightly at all costs (3.9). Some were making *shipwreck* concerning the faith (1.19), *departing* from the faith (4.1), *denying* the faith (5.8), *casting off* the faith (5.12) and had *erred* (wandered) or *deviated* (swerved) from the faith (6.10, 21). Paul thus presents *five* ‘faithful sayings’ in the pastoral epistles concerning: salvation (1.15), shepherding (3.1), sanctification (4.9), sacrifice (2 Timothy 2.11) and service (Titus 3.8). These are *faithful* or *trustworthy* statements as coming from a ‘trustworthy’ God (1 Corinthians 1.9; 10.13). In a world of apostasy and the casting off of truth, here are statements which can be depended upon with full confidence. In fact, to disbelieve it would be unreasonable and unwise (MacDonald).

- **Beauty of godliness** (*eusebeia*, x8). This is the NT equivalent of 'the fear of the Lord'. At its most basic, 'godliness' is likeness to God. But the Greek word suggests an inner attitude of heart that '*gives to God His proper place in thinking (the intelligence), loving (the emotions), and doing (the will) that thus renders to Him due reverence and respect*' (Jim Allen). Godliness was perfectly expressed in Christ (3.16). It requires *training* (4.7) and should be *pursued* (6.11). It is *developed* by imbibing the word of God (6.3). Many make an outward show and profession of such godliness (piety) but show no practical evidence of the power of God in the life (2 Timothy 3.5). *Sisters* display godliness by their proper and becoming dress as well as silent submission in the assembly (2.9-12). *Children* and *grandchildren* should develop godliness in the home (5.4) as well as the public *servant* of God in his ministry (4.6-8).
- **Behaviour** in the *house of God* (3.15). The 'house of God' is the place where He dwells; the place where His presence is known and experienced. In the OT, the house of God referred to a *place* (Bethel), then a *building* (tabernacle and temple). In the NT, the house of God is a *people*, a 'spiritual edifice comprised of living stones' (1 Peter 2.5). In the OT, God's people went *into* the house. In the NT, God's people *are* the house! First Timothy emphasises the standard of behaviour that becomes the house, i.e. godliness, in accordance with sound doctrine. *Hamilton Smith: Firstly, the Apostle writes to charge believers to live the practical life of piety consistent with the house of God (3.15). Secondly, the Apostle writes to instruct us that the great purpose of the house of God is to be a witness in the world that God is a Saviour God (2.4).*

### The Epistle of First Timothy: The Servant

- His **childhood**. Timothy lived in Lystra, having a (unbelieving) *Greek* father and *Jewish* mother called Eunice. Both Lois (his grandmother) and Eunice were characterised by genuine (real) faith in God (2 Timothy 1.5). From infancy Timothy was taught the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3.15).
- His **character**. Timothy means 'honoured' or 'prized' of God. *It is possible to sum up the 20 years in Timothy's NT story as simply a series of missions and journeys with nothing very striking about any of them.* But the NT emphasises, not so much what Timothy did, but what he was. His character is highly prized. He brought *encouragement* to the heart of the aged apostle as one who was caring and loving (2 Timothy 1.4; 4.9). He was possibly a little *shy* but (2 Timothy 1.7, 1 Corinthians 16.10) *faithful* and *dependable* to the end. Tradition says he was martyred in AD 97 at 65 years of age, 30 years since the martyrdom of Paul. Ultimately Timothy became an imitator of his spiritual father who in turn was an imitator of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 4.16-17).
- His **conversion**. Timothy was saved under the preaching of Paul (1.2), likely during his *first* missionary journey (Acts 14, AD 47). No doubt Timothy recognised the same 'unfeigned' faith in Paul as in his mother (cf. Acts 14.19-20). His childhood training in the things of God had made him receptive to the gospel.
- His **call**. Approximately *five* years after Acts 14, Paul returned on his *second* missionary journey (Acts 16.1-3). Timothy was now about 20 years of age. He had a 'good testimony' of the brethren (v.2) who clearly witnessed to his changed life. He had made spiritual progress (4.15). Consequently, Paul 'wanted Timothy to accompany him' (v.3 NET). *Allen: The Holy Spirit identified Timothy as equipped and gifted for full-time service in the company of the apostle (1.18). Timothy had already a good testimony in the local assemblies at Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:2), so the elders of the local assembly (4.14), and the apostle (2 Timothy 1.6), acknowledged the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the symbolic identification with Timothy in his call by the laying on of hands.*
- His **charge**. In Thessalonica, Timothy had a ministry of *comfort* (1 Thessalonians 3.1); in Corinth a ministry of *correction* (1 Corinthians 4.17); in Philippi a ministry of *care* (Philippians 2.20) and in Rome a ministry of *companionship* (2 Timothy 4.9, 21). At Ephesus it was a ministry of *consolidation* in restraining and correcting the corruption of false teaching. The only antidote was 'sound' (healthy) doctrine. Thus, Timothy must *practice* (model) godly Christian living and *preach* the truth of God at the tender age of **34** (cf. 4.12-13).

### The Epistle of First Timothy: The Saints

Timothy ministered to the saints at Ephesus. The name Ephesus means 'desirable', and the assembly had many desirable features. Ephesus can also mean 'to relax' or 'loosen', sadly true of their devotion to Christ (Revelation 2.4). Ephesus was the *third* largest city in Roman Empire with a population of 250,000. It was a 'free' city having the right of self-government. The imperial cult was prominent, Caesar Domitian demanding worship as 'god' and 'lord'. Ephesus was highly idolatrous, housing over 50 idol temples. Dominating the region was the worship and temple of Artemis, the goddess of fertility. A pagan philosopher named *Heraclitus* (535-475BC), who was born and lived in Ephesus, said the inhabitants of the city had lower morals than animals: '*The Ephesians deserved to be hanged, every last one of them.*' The church itself enjoyed tremendous privilege having experienced the ministry of Apollos, Aquila, Paul, Timothy and John. Indeed, *four* books of the NT are directly linked to Ephesus (including Revelation 2.1-7).

For the **structure** of the epistle see accompanying chart.