

Starting Wednesday 26 May 2021

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The Pastoral Letters

This name for St Paul's 2 letters to Timothy and that to Titus dates from the 18th Century. Though these letters are not pastoral manuals, they exhort & encourage these 2 close associates of Paul in their current & future pastoral responsibilities. We are confident they date from the last few years of Paul's life, because they set out his thoughts as he prepares to pass his tasks to others. In the 19th Century, theologians emboldened by the absence of corroborative evidence from the Acts of the Apostles (which finishes as Paul arrives in Rome), began to question whether Paul wrote these 3 letters. Though they differ from Paul's other epistles in content & vocabulary, that is what we might expect: as Paul had worked closely with both recipients, there was no need for deep theology; as Romans, Paul's last epistle to a Church, was probably written 5 years earlier, Paul presumably used a different scribe.

Wednesday 26 May – 1 Timothy Chapter 1: Paul & Timothy

vv1&2: Paul greets Timothy, whom he had recently left in Ephesus (where he had established the Church 10 years before) to look after that Church. So why did Paul write this letter? Perhaps to give Timothy visible authority?

vv3-7: Paul urges Timothy to refute false teaching at Ephesus. Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor & an important port on the trade route from Asia (major) to Rome. So Ephesus supported many religions, who exploited opportunities to infiltrate the growing Christian Church & create heretical variations on the Christianity that Paul had founded. What heresies does the Methodist Church need to refute in the 21st Century?

vv8-11: In his commentary on Romans, Howard Jackson shrewdly asked "Is it fair to label Paul 'homophobic' when assumed homosexual acts (are) a single aspect of the behaviour of the whole Roman Empire, which was corrupt, violent and committing every conceivable form of sin and depravity?". As vv9 & 10 of 1 Timothy give another list of the sins of the Roman Empire, I agree. Rather than duck this question entirely, I refer readers keen to read a personal commentary on this to Revd Marcus Green's recent monograph "The possibility of difference: a Biblical affirmation of inclusivity", published by Kevin Mayhew Ltd (ISBN 9781 84867 9726).

vv12-17: Paul gives thanks for his deep experience of God's mercy. Do we pay similar tribute to our experiences?

vv18-20: Paul urges Timothy to keep his faith & a clear conscience, & commissions him to lead the Ephesian Church. Have we recently reviewed our faith & our conscience, & audited the progress of our commission?

Thursday 27 May – 1 Timothy Chapter 2: Worship & order in the Church

vv1-7: Paul guides Timothy in the conduct of public worship in words very appropriate to the 21st Century.

vv8-15: Paul allocates women & men different roles in the conduct of that worship. In the early 1990s Revd Dick France [then Principal of Wycliffe Hall Oxford; later Rector of Wentnor (Salop) & Snead (Powys); & Honorary Research Fellow at Bangor University until his death in 2012] made a seminal contribution to the debate about the ordination of women in the Church of England. In 1995 Wipf & Stock published his key monograph "Women in the Church's Ministry: test-case for Biblical Hermeneutics" (ISBN 159244 6175). Of these verses he says:

"Here, as so often in Paul's letters, he is dealing with a specific local issue. How far his instructions to Timothy in Ephesus can be extrapolated to other areas of church life must be for argument, not for tacit assumption. It is hard to deny that this text prohibits women teaching men in the Ephesian Church; but its reason is not to correct the rest of the New Testament, but to correct a specific problem in Ephesus."

Friday 28 May – 1 Timothy Chapter 3: Leaders & helpers in the Church

vv1-13: To complement the job description for Church leaders that underpins this letter, Paul provides person specifications for both leaders (which Anglicans translate as "bishops") & helpers (which Presbyterians translate as "elders"). As St John's Methodist Church undertook redevelopment in 2020, & then reopening, we drafted several job descriptions & person specifications. As all our Churches seek to refresh their missions after the pandemic, should we ourselves refresh our Church job descriptions & person specifications? Would we get our jobs back?

vv14-16: From his exile in Rome (?), Paul reveals the great secret of the Christian faith to Timothy & the Church whom he now leads. How do we (notably those exiled outside Wales) describe the great secret of our faith?