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Getting our bearings in 1 Timothy



INTRODUCING THE MESSAGE

For many congregations, 1 Timothy is a neglected part of the New Testament. This may be for a number of reasons which will be explored in more detail below, but perhaps mainly it is because many of us will naturally want to shy away from the controversial passage relating to women's ministry in the local church (1 Tim. 2:11-15) in order to avoid the potential collision

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between the apostle Paul's teaching and the expectations of modern culture. However, as we navigate our way amidst the surroundings of this culture it is clear that there are many benefits from reading 1 Timothy.

At the heart of 1 Timothy is a concern for godliness within God's household in order to enable the truth of the gospel to be displayed to the world (see 3:15). There is also a drive to bring a church infected with false teaching back to full health and vigour. Wherever, therefore, the gospel has been obscured and worldly behaviour has become commonplace, 1 Timothy has a striking relevance and application. If you want to read and meditate on a Bible book which will call you and the church to focus more on the gospel and godly living in order to advance the gospel within your community, then 1 Timothy is an extremely appropriate choice.



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INTRODUCING PAUL

The book starts with an introduction from the author, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus. Within 1 Timothy there are several passages which are autobiographical and they helpfully pick up two distinct aspects of the apostle's life and ministry.

- First, 1:12-16 refers to his conversion. The narrative of these events is found in Acts 9 which backs up the material found here. We are informed that Paul had been a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man (1:13), such that as he looks back towards the end of his ministry, perhaps around A.D. 63-65, he is able to describe himself as the worst of sinners (1:15, 16). Yet having been involved in persecuting the church, his life was turned around through the amazing grace, mercy and patience of the Lord (1:13-16). Paul glories in knowing God as his Saviour

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(1:1, 2:4, 4:10) and at several points simply overflows in praise to the God who has shown such undeserved love (1:17; 6:15, 16).

- Second, 1:12 and 2:7 reveal that not only was Paul converted, but he was also given a special commission by the Lord Jesus Christ. He was entrusted with the gospel message (1:11) and appointed in particular to be an apostle to the Gentiles/nations so that the whole world could learn about the Lord Jesus Christ through his ministry of preaching and teaching, which again links in with the conversion narrative in Acts 9:15. Paul therefore has a particular burden to ensure that the church at Ephesus which he had been involved in planting should also embody that same vision to take the gospel to the world.





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The letter is written by Paul to ‘Timothy my true son in the faith’ (1:2). Again the passages in Acts flesh out the details. Timothy first appears at Lystra, in modern-day Turkey in Acts 16:1 and the best explanation of Paul’s reference to him as ‘my true son’ (1:2) or ‘my son’ (1:18) would appear to be that Timothy had come to follow Christ through the ministry of the apostle Paul, as is further suggested in Philippians 2:22.

Second, he is soon found accompanying Paul on his missionary journeys (Acts 16:3; 17:14f; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4) and as time goes on he is often sent ahead by Paul as an envoy (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10; 1 Thess. 3:6).

Third, such a close working partnership develops that Paul can refer to him as his co-worker (Rom.16:21) and several of his epistles are sent jointly from Paul and Timothy (2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess.1:1; 2 Thess.1:1; Philem. 1).





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Fourth, we learn that Timothy's ministry is noteworthy for his concern both for Christ's interests and the welfare of the churches he serves (Phil. 2:20, 21). Rather than being concerned for his own security or reputation, he has given himself to the cause of Christ, the gospel and the local church. Mention is sometimes made of Timothy's timidity (2 Tim.1:7) and his physical weakness (5:23) but these verses need to be set in the context of a wholehearted ministry of service to the Lord Jesus Christ, which includes imprisonment for the sake of the gospel (Heb. 13:23).

Timothy may indeed need encouragement from Paul to face the demands of ministry and the hostility that sometimes accompanied this role but, as 1 Thessalonians 3:2 reminds us, he was a dear brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ as he



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sought to strengthen and encourage the early Christian churches in their faith.

INTRODUCING THE CHURCH

When Paul writes this letter, Timothy is based in Ephesus (1:3). He had been sent there in order to sort out particular problems that had been developing. As Paul's representative, his task was to call the church back to the apostolic teaching that it had received originally. Though the letter is primarily written to his trusted friend, it is also written to be heard by that church, as is evidenced by the use of the plural 'you' in the final verse of the epistle (6:21: 'Grace be with you'). This makes it a letter for every Christian, not just for Christian leaders.

This church had been planted by the apostle Paul (Acts 19) and he committed himself to building it through an unusually long stay in the city of two years (Acts 19:10, and see 1 Cor. 16:8-9) where



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he talks of a door for effective work having opened up at Ephesus) so that he could see it firmly established. His relationship with the church can be seen in his farewell speech to the church leaders at Ephesus when he was passing nearby on a subsequent missionary journey (Acts 20:17-35).

Speaking to the elders, whom he also refers to as overseers or bishops (Acts 20:17, 28 – the same terms used at 1 Tim. 3:1; 5:17), he speaks of his labours in Ephesus before highlighting the danger of false teachers appearing from within that leadership (Acts 20:29, 30) which is the very issue which later causes him to write 1 Timothy (1:3; 6:3). Life for Paul at Ephesus had not been easy (see 1 Cor.15:32 where he speaks of battling with wild animals – a reference to the hostile reception he received within his Ephesian ministry), yet there had also been support from people such as Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 1:16-18).



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The other material which specifically relates to Ephesus is Paul's letter to the Ephesians, though this may well have been a circular letter which was not exclusive to that city. Moreover, at the end of the New Testament there is the material in Revelation 2:1-7 in the Lord Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus. Significantly, amidst all the good things to report, the Lord highlights the serious problem that the church had lost its first love.

Somehow, though continuing in service to Christ in various ways, they were no longer marked by a great passion for Him – other things were obscuring the gospel. This piercing diagnosis can also be applied to the church at Ephesus when 1 Timothy was written. Though there are certainly many good things to report, somehow the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ was no longer central, and part of Paul's encouragement to Timothy is to ensure



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that the gospel shapes the life of the church far more than it had been doing.

INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

The issue which Paul is especially concerned about and which motivates him to write to Timothy is flagged up right at the outset at 1:3. Some people were teaching 'other doctrines', fulfilling the warning of Acts 20:29, 30. The passages within 1 Timothy which are particularly relevant in gaining an understanding of what was being taught include 1:3-7; 4:1-3; 6:3-5 and 6:20, 21. The church appears not to have plunged into doctrinal heresy in an outright rejection of the gospel, but the effect of the prevailing teaching was that the glorious gospel was being obscured through a focus on law (1:7; 4:3) which led to legalism and infighting within the church (1:4, 6; 6:3-5, 20) and the further danger of people wandering from the faith (1:6; 5:15; 6:10, 21).

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The result was an inward-looking church characterised by distinctly ungodly behaviour, which had no doubt caused the church to have a poor reputation within the surrounding community. The fact that Paul begins and ends his epistle with such a clarion call for Timothy to sort out these issues out (1:3; 6:20f) gives the clearest indication that this is why he has been forced to write.



However, it would be a mistake to think that the letter is simply a negative reaction to a set of challenging circumstances. The positive thrust of Paul's writing can be seen right at the heart of the epistle at 3:15, with his call for godly living which will cause the gospel to be displayed within Ephesus. This positive thrust is developed in many ways as he seeks to reshape the church so as to make an impact for the gospel on the surrounding society.

