

Study Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy

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1 Timothy
The priorities of a godly church

1. Timothy and the false teachers

1 Timothy 1:1-20

Timothy's task (1 Timothy 1:1-7)

Many Christians, or other readers of the Bible, pass very quickly over the opening verses of Paul's epistles. They want to get to the 'meat' of the letter and these opening verses sound so boring and mundane. 'Paul ... to the Corinthians ... blah blah blah,' is often the attitude.

But there is much that is valuable and precious to be gained from these introductory passages, and in fact the opening sections of Paul's letters give many important clues as to the apostle's purposes and to the emphases of individual letters, and they typically introduce us to crucial concepts that we shall find later.

Paul's opening greeting sections, or 'salutations', are both like and unlike the salutations of standard personal letters in the Graeco-Roman world. Today, we generally begin letters by naming the addressee ('Dear John') and we end them by signing our name ('Sincerely, Bill'). But letters in the Graeco-Roman world typically began by naming the writer and then the addressee. This would then be followed by the Greek word *chairein*, which is translated 'greetings'. All of Paul's letters follow this basic pattern. He begins

by naming himself and his co-authors (if any), though he usually elaborates on his own personal identity in some way (1 Thessalonians is an exception to this). Then he names the person(s) he is addressing. But instead of the standard greeting, *chairein*, Paul uses a similar but more theologically loaded word, *charis*, ‘grace’, and then adds a further theologically significant word, ‘peace’ (while in 1 and 2 Timothy he adds yet another, ‘mercy’). Thus we see Paul operating within the conventions of his day, and yet adapting them to fit his own (and the Holy Spirit’s) purposes and agendas.

It is important for us, furthermore, to see how the opening sections of individual letters are both like and unlike those in Paul’s other epistles. Because the opening sections, and especially the greeting passages, are so standard and so similar, features which are unique to an individual letter give us a clue to the distinctive purposes and emphases of that letter. We shall look at the features that are specific to 1 Timothy in the course of the exposition that follows.

Salutation: The sovereign God sets apart his servants and sanctifies his saints (1:1-2)

1:1-2. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, in accordance with the command of God our Saviour and Christ Jesus our hope, to Timothy my true child in faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the salutation which introduces 1 Timothy, we meet the principal human actors, Paul and Timothy. Yet it is clear in these opening verses that Paul’s focus is on the divine protagonists. Twice in these two opening verses Paul refers to the first two persons of the Trinity, God and Christ Jesus. God sets apart his servants, calling men to various ministries. God also

sanctifies all his saints, lavishly pouring spiritual blessings on them.

God's sets apart his servants (1:1-2a)

Paul begins by emphasizing that God has called him to be **'an apostle'**. He refers to himself as an apostle in the salutations introducing nine out of his thirteen letters. The term designates Paul's own authority. Apostles were eyewitnesses to the ministry of Christ, and especially to his resurrection (cf. Acts 1:21-22). Apostles were set apart by Christ from among his other followers (generally designated 'disciples' — Luke 6:13), and were given a special task and authority by Christ, so that they eventually became the 'foundation' of the church (Eph. 2:20). Paul, like the original twelve apostles, was given a special task and a distinct authority by Jesus Christ. He had seen the risen Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8), and Christ had specifically called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16; 2:7; Rom. 11:13). To reject the teaching of the apostles is to reject the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why does Paul need to affirm his apostleship in this letter to Timothy? Certainly Timothy knows all about Paul's credentials. We need to keep in mind that this letter is not simply a private correspondence addressed to Timothy. It is what we may call a 'semi-public' letter. At the end of this letter, Paul writes, 'Grace be with you' (6:21) and the 'you' there is plural. Clearly Paul has more people in mind than Timothy alone as he writes. He is addressing the whole church through Timothy. Furthermore, as Calvin argues, part of Paul's intention in this letter seems to be to undergird both his own and Timothy's authority.¹ Paul as an apostle must be respected, but so must Paul's personal representative.

Paul draws attention to the special nature of his apostolic authority by saying that his apostleship is

‘in accordance with the command’ of both God and Christ Jesus. Typically in his salutations, Paul modifies the statement that he is an apostle in some way: sometimes he adds that he is an apostle ‘by / through the will of God’ (2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; cf. also 1 Cor. 1:1); or that he has been ‘called to be an apostle’ (Rom. 1:1); or that he is an apostle ‘through Jesus Christ and God the Father’ (Gal. 1:1); or else he simply describes himself as an apostle ‘of Christ Jesus’ (Titus 1:1). 1 Timothy is unique in that Paul stresses that his apostleship is by God’s command.

This phrase not only strengthens Paul’s (and, consequently, Timothy’s) authority; it also reflects the prominent theme of ‘commanding’ found in the rest of the epistle (1:3,5,18; 4:11; 5:7; 6:13-14,17).² Paul consistently exhorts Timothy to ‘command’ the church, and especially the false teachers, with regard to various matters. Thus the one who gives orders is himself under orders.³ Paul sets up, in other words, a chain of command. All the orders that come from Paul to Timothy, and through Timothy to the church, ultimately originate in God himself. Paul and Timothy are merely messengers, but they are messengers who bear the authoritative stamp of the King of kings.

The appellations that Paul applies to God and to Christ in this salutation are unusual, but once again they reflect important themes in this epistle.

First, Paul refers to God as **‘our Saviour’**. Outside of the Pastoral Epistles, Paul never speaks of God as ‘Saviour’, although both explicitly (Phil. 1:28) and implicitly, he clearly writes of God as the source of salvation. Twice outside of the Pastorals, Paul speaks of Christ as ‘Saviour’ (Eph. 5:23; Phil. 3:20). But in the Pastoral Epistles, he refers to God as ‘Saviour’ six times (1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4), and to Christ as ‘Saviour’ three times (2 Tim. 1:10; Titus

1:4; 2:13).⁴ Furthermore, the theme of salvation is vital to the rest of 1 Timothy. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1:15). God as Saviour desires the salvation of ‘all men’ (2:3-4), and therefore Christians should pray for all (2:1). Thus Paul’s reference to God as ‘Saviour’ here in the salutation gives us a hint that God’s purposes and activities with regard to the work of salvation are going to be at the very heart and soul of the letter.⁵ It is even possible that Paul here is beginning to correct the false teachers’ denial of the universal scope of God’s saving activity, since the only other occurrences in this letter of God as ‘Saviour’ are specifically tied to the salvation of ‘all’ (2:3-4; 4:10; cf. Titus 2:10-11).⁶

Secondly, Paul calls Christ Jesus **‘our hope’**. In biblical thought, hope and salvation are closely linked. God is the hope of his people precisely because he is their salvation (cf., e.g., Jer. 14:8; 17:12-14). Paul reflects this biblical mindset explicitly later in this letter when he states, ‘... we have set our hope on the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe’ (4:10). In particular, however, Christ Jesus is the object and the source of our hope. For Paul, ‘Christ in you’ is ‘the hope of glory’ (Col. 1:27). The glorification of believers will be nothing less than their being changed into Christ’s image and likeness. But this finally takes place only when Christ appears at his Second Coming. Thus Paul, combining once again the language of ‘hope’ and ‘Saviour’, says to Titus that we await ‘our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ’ (Titus 2:13). Ultimately, God has chosen to bring salvation through Jesus Christ. He is our only hope, because he is the only Saviour of the world. As Calvin states, ‘It is when we look to Christ that we begin to have good hope, for in Him alone all our salvation is found.’⁷

In verse 2, Paul turns to the recipient of the letter. He calls Timothy his **‘true child in faith’**. Sometimes Paul uses the language of ‘father’ and ‘child’ to refer to those whom he has led to the Lord through the preaching of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14-15; Philem. 10). It is uncertain, however, whether Timothy was converted through Paul’s ministry, and in fact the evidence from Acts 16 seems to suggest otherwise.⁸ The use of the term **‘child’** here, then, probably indicates an intimate relationship between the two, in which Paul serves as mentor, guide and father figure, while Timothy displays filial love, faithfulness and a clear reflection of Paul’s outlook, actions and attitudes. As Chrysostom has argued, the idea of being a child here reflects the notion of ‘likeness’.⁹ As a son reflects the likeness of a father, so Timothy bears a resemblance to Paul.

Paul specifies particularly that Timothy is his child **‘in faith’**. There is no article before ‘faith’ in the Greek, so it is probably best to think not of ‘the faith’, i.e., the Christian faith or religion, but rather of Timothy’s personal faith or trust in Christ. Thus, it is in the realm of faith that Timothy bears a resemblance to Paul. Paul expresses much the same idea in 1 Corinthians 4:16-17 when he says that he has sent Timothy, his ‘beloved and faithful child in the Lord’, to remind them of his ways in Christ. The Corinthians are to imitate Paul, but they are to do so by observing Paul’s ‘child’ Timothy.¹⁰ Thus, by calling Timothy his ‘child’, Paul not only attempts to establish Timothy’s authority, but he presents Timothy as one who should serve as an example and a guide for the Ephesians’ faith.

Paul further establishes Timothy’s authority and respectability by calling him his **‘true’** child in faith. The Greek word *gnēsios* has the sense of ‘genuine’ or ‘legitimate’, and was often used to contrast legitimate from illegitimate children. Paul is giving Timothy his

unequivocal stamp of approval. Timothy is Paul's legitimate representative to the church in Ephesus. The Ephesian church should give Timothy the same respect and obedience that they would give to Paul himself, whose authority ultimately derives from the Ruler of all.

We see, then, in this opening verse and a half that Paul sets up for us a chain of command. God is the sovereign Ruler who commands men and calls them to various tasks. Thus God is supreme even as he acts through human agents. These tasks, furthermore, carry varying levels of authority. Paul is clearly above Timothy in the 'chain of command'. Paul is the apostle who has been endowed with special authority. Timothy, the true son, is to be a faithful reflection of Paul's life and teaching, but still carries authority in the church.

The questions for us are twofold. First, are we willing to submit to those in authority over us in the church, recognizing that God has placed them in those positions of leadership? Timothy was young and clearly had foibles. This question is easier to raise than to answer in practice, especially given the egalitarian spirit of our age.

Secondly, are we ready to fulfil whatever function God has for us? John Newton states, 'If two angels were to receive at the same moment a commission from God, one to go down and rule earth's grandest empire, the other to go and sweep the streets of its meanest village, it would be a matter of entire indifference to each which service fell to his lot, the post of ruler or the post of scavenger; for the joy of the angels lies only in obedience to God's will.' May God grant us humility both to submit and to serve as he, in his sovereignty, sees fit.

God sanctifies his saints (1:2b)

Not only does God put individuals in positions of authority over his church, he also pours out spiritual blessings on his people. Here in particular Paul mentions three of those blessings — **‘grace, mercy and peace’**. As already stated, the phrase ‘grace and peace’ is Paul’s standard way of ending the greeting sections of his letters. The word ‘mercy’ is not normally found in Paul’s salutations, but it makes a fitting addition.

‘Grace’ is a reference not simply to God’s unmerited favour, but to God’s favour granted in face of absolute demerit. Paul makes clear, without a shadow of a doubt, that, from beginning to end, salvation is by God’s grace alone, and not by any merit or works that human beings have or do. ‘Grace’ can also refer to the ongoing grace, or strength, of God, given to believers to help them in their weakness (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9; Heb. 4:16). This grace, furthermore, results in peace.

The inclusion of **‘peace’** along with grace in Paul’s greetings reflects his Jewish heritage, where the idea of *shalom* carries the sense of wholeness and completeness. The grace of God brings peace in the sense of reconciliation — that is, we who were once God’s enemies have now been brought into a right relationship with him. But it also brings an inner peace and rest that is beyond human comprehension (Phil. 4:7).

What do we make of the addition of **‘mercy’** to this well-established formula? Later in this chapter, Paul is going to dwell on the mercy that God has shown to him, undeserving though he is. Paul anticipates this discussion by inserting the atypical word ‘mercy’ into his greeting. ‘Mercy’ carries the idea of compassion to the needy,¹¹ but in Hebrew usage and in Paul’s writings it is more specific than that. The Greek word used here, *eleos*, often translates the Hebrew word,