

## REFLECTIONS ON CHURCH ORDER IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES, WITH FURTHER REFLECTION ON THE HERMENEUTICS OF *AD HOC* DOCUMENTS

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An old saw says, "Give a dog an ill name and hang him." The same can also be true of a complimentary name. When Paul Anton of Halle (1726) first called Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus the Pastoral Epistles (PE), and it stuck, they have been forever thereafter read and understood as consisting "mostly of advice to younger ministers."<sup>1</sup> However one may feel about the question of authorship,<sup>2</sup> the view as to their occasion and purpose has been basically singular. Whether in Paul's lifetime or later, the letters are seen as responses to the encroachment of alien ideas in some Pauline churches with a view to setting the churches in order as the proper antidote to heresy. Hence they are read and consulted as "church manuals," whose basic intent was to give the ongoing Church instructions on church order in light of Paul's advanced age and impending death (or the decline of his influence at the end of the first century, for those who consider the letters pseudepigraphic). Indeed, so fixed is this view in the Church that I recently taught a course on the exegesis of these letters in a seminary where the students by taking my course could receive credit for their pastoral ministry requirement.

The concerns of this paper are double-edged. First, I want to offer an alternative to the traditional way of viewing the occasion and purpose of the PE (limited to 1 Timothy) and to reexamine the questions of church order in light of that purpose. Second, I hope to reopen the hermeneutical questions about church order in light of this exegesis and offer some suggestions about contemporary relevance. These are suggestions at best; no specific applications to any local church or denomination are being contended for.

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<sup>1</sup>See e.g. A. M. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (2d rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1957) 148.

<sup>2</sup>Although this is the great problem of the PE and affects nearly everything one says about them, it is much less so for the question of occasion and purpose. For the arguments pro and con for Pauline authorship see (pro) D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (3d rev. ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970) 584-634; (con) A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2-51. Although fully aware of the difficulties I am convinced that the PE are ultimately Pauline because, *inter alia*, (1) one can make such good sense of them as fitting the historical situation of the mid-60s; (2) I have yet to have anyone give a good answer to the question: Why three letters? That is, given 1 Timothy, why did a pseudepigrapher write Titus, and given 1 Timothy and Titus and their concerns, why 2 Timothy at all?

The "church manual" approach to the PE has almost always paid lip-service to the threat of the false teachers (FT) as the occasion of 1 Timothy but has usually all but lost sight of that occasion when exegeting the letter, except for the places where the FT are specifically mentioned. Thus after setting the stage in chap. 1 by ordering Timothy to stop the FT, Paul's real concern, the "ordering" of the church, begins in chap. 2 with instructions on prayer (2:1-8). This in turn gives way to a discussion on the role of women in the church—they are to be quiet (2:9-15)—which is followed by instructions for the appointment of overseers and deacons (3:1-13). After another brief note about the FT in 4:1-5, Paul sets Timothy forth as a model for ministry (4:6-5:2). In chap. 5 he sets out the qualifications for a ministering order of widows (5:3-16) and rules for the pay and discipline of elders (5:17-25). He concludes in chap. 6 by returning to the theme of the FT (6:3-5) and of Timothy's serving as a pastoral model of perseverance and holding fast the truth of the gospel.

As popular and deeply entrenched as that view is—on both sides of the question of authenticity—there are several reasons for doubting it as an accurate reflection of what is happening in 1 Timothy. Besides the rather total lack of logic to the argument of the letter as thus presented, one must ruefully admit that we are left with far more questions about church order than answers. (Surely this whole perspective should have been questioned long ago simply on the existential grounds that such diverse groups as Roman Catholics, Plymouth Brethren and Presbyterians all use the PE to support their ecclesiastical structures.) If one counters that the reason for this has to do with the *ad hoc* nature of the epistle, then it must be noted that such a response is tantamount to admission that church order per se is not the purpose of the letter.

Furthermore a careful exegesis of the whole, as well as of most of the individual paragraphs, of 1 Timothy suggests that this view has enormous exegetical difficulties to overcome. For example, any careful reading of 2:1-7 reveals that the concern in this paragraph is not with instruction on prayer as such, nor on the necessity of four kinds of prayer being offered in church, nor on prayer for rulers so that believers can live peaceable lives (the most common views). Rather, the emphasis is that prayer be made for all people, precisely because this is pleasing to the one God who wants all people to be saved, and for the sake of whom Christ is the one mediator, having given himself a ransom for all people. That emphasis scarcely accords with the "church manual" approach to the paragraph and is therefore commonly slighted or neglected altogether.

If 1 Timothy is not primarily a church manual, what then? The key to its purpose, as proposed here, is to take with full seriousness three pieces of data: Paul's own statements of purpose in 1 Tim 1:3 and 3:15 and the content of Paul's farewell address as given by Luke in Acts 20:17-35, especially 20:30.

(1) In 1 Tim 1:3 Paul explicitly tells Timothy that the reason he was left in Ephesus was not to set the church in order (cf. Titus 1:5) but to "command certain [people] not to teach false doctrines any longer" (NIV). The whole of 1 Timothy in fact is dominated by this singular concern, and it is clear from the letter that their teaching involves both doctrinal and behavioral aberrations. Based on speculations about the OT (= myths and wearisome genealogies, 1:4; cf. 1:7; Titus 1:14-16; 3:9), this false teaching is being presented as *gnōsis* (6:20)

and apparently has an esoteric—and exclusivistic—appeal.<sup>3</sup> This exclusivism is furthered by an appeal to an ascetic ideal (4:3; perhaps 5:23; cf. Titus 1:14-16), which in Titus 1:14 is caricatured in the language of Isa 29:13 as “the commandments of men.” The FT themselves made their teachings a matter of quarreling and strife, battling over mere words, Paul says (6:3-5). Indeed, over against the “healthy teaching” of the gospel they have a “sickly craving” for controversy,<sup>4</sup> and the bottom line is greed. They have come to view their religious instruction as a means of turning a drachma (6:5-10; cf. 3:3, 8). For Paul such teaching is ultimately demonic (4:1-2), and those who have followed it have gone astray after Satan (5:15; cf. 2:14; 3:6-7; 2 Tim 2:25).

Unfortunately, many seem to be capitulating (4:1; 6:21; cf. 2 Tim 1:15; 2:18; 4:3-4), and that is the great urgency of this letter—for Timothy to stop the FT and thereby, by his own example and teaching, to save his hearers (4:16).

(2) Thus the point of his second statement as to the reason for writing (3:15) is not so “that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God” (*KJV*), implying that Timothy would hereby learn how to do things “in church,” but so that “you will know what kind of conduct befits a member of God’s household” (*NAB*).<sup>5</sup> That is, Paul is giving instructions on how God’s true people ought to behave, and it is not like the FT. Indeed, the whole of chaps. 2-3 is best understood as instruction vis-à-vis the behavior and attitudes of the FT.<sup>6</sup>

(3) When one adds the evidence from Acts 20:30, it is clear that Timothy’s task in Ephesus, in contrast to Titus’ on Crete, is not that of appointing elders. The church in Ephesus already had elders several years earlier, and Paul in this speech is predicting that from among their own number will arise those who will lead the church astray.<sup>7</sup> Take the content of that prediction seriously as actually

<sup>3</sup>The question of the nature of the false teaching is not fully agreed upon. The term “Gnostic,” especially in its second-century form, is rather thoroughly misleading. Few of the essential ingredients of that system are present. I am inclined to a view that sees genuine affinities with the “heresy” in Colosse a few years earlier, which is probably a form of Hellenistic Judaism that has imbibed a good deal from Hellenism. For earlier but divergent forms of this view see J. B. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893) 411-418; F. J. A. Hort, *Judaistic Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1894) 132-133.

<sup>4</sup>For the use of medical imagery (“sound” or “healthy” teaching; “sickly craving for controversy”) in polemical contexts in Hellenism and the PE see A. J. Malherbe, “Medical Imagery in the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers* (ed. W. E. March; San Antonio: Trinity University, 1980) 19-35.

<sup>5</sup>There is no expressed subject of the infinitive *anastrephesthai* (“to conduct oneself”) in Paul’s sentence, and it must be inferred from the context. The *KJV*’s “thou . . . thyself” is the least likely option. The *GNB* has “we . . . ourselves,” but “people . . . themselves” (*NAB, NIV, NEB*) is to be preferred. The *Living Bible*’s “you will know what kind of men you choose as officers of the church” is altogether unwarranted.

<sup>6</sup>The full presentation of this position may be found in my commentary on the PE in the *Good News Commentary* series (Harper, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>The data of this speech need to be taken more seriously by scholars on both sides of the question of authenticity. If it is true prediction, then Luke’s recording of it accords with what he knows to have taken place. If the speech was created by Luke *after* the fact, then it is best argued that he really did so *after the fact*—that is, he based it on what he knew to have happened in Ephesus. In either case the defection of some Ephesian elders in the 60s looks like a piece of solid historical datum.

having come to pass and the whole of 1 Timothy falls into place. The reason for the great urgency in 1 Timothy, and for Paul's concern over Timothy's own reception and well-being, lies in the probability that the FT in that letter were some elders who had themselves strayed from Paul's gospel and were in the process of taking the church, or many within the church, with them into error.

This probability is supported by several other data:

(a) Quite in contrast to Galatians or 2 Corinthians, there is not a hint in 1 or 2 Timothy that the FT are outsiders. In fact everything points to their being insiders.<sup>8</sup> They clearly function as teachers (1:3; 6:7; 6:3); they have themselves wandered away from and made shipwreck of their faith (1:6, 19); and two of them are named and have been excommunicated (1:20).

Since teaching is the one clearly expressed duty of the elders (3:3; 5:17), it follows naturally that the FT were already teachers—thus elders—who have gone astray.

(b) It seems certain from 2:9-15; 5:11-15; 2 Tim 3:6-7 that the FT have had considerable influence among some women, especially some younger widows. These women have opened their homes to the FT and have themselves become the propagators of the new teachings. In 5:13 they are described as busybodies, going from house to house, speakers of foolishness<sup>9</sup> and saying things they should not (cf. the similar description of the FT in 1:6-7), and in v 15 they are declared to have "already turned away to follow Satan." Since in 2 Tim 3:6-7 the FT, depicted now as religious charlatans like the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses, worm their way into the homes of these women, it is highly likely that the women are themselves well maintained and are the source of the FT's "dishonest gain." This also explains the great concern of 5:3-16, which is not to set up an order of ministering widows<sup>10</sup> but to distinguish those "genuine" (*ontōs*; 5:3, 5, 16) widows, who need to be supported by the church, from these younger widows who are part of the trouble in Ephesus.<sup>11</sup>

(c) It is therefore altogether likely, based both on the evidence of 2 Tim 3:6-7 (the FT making their way into houses) and of 1 Cor 16:19 (Aquila and Priscilla have a "house church" in Ephesus), that corporate life in the church in Ephesus was not experienced in a large Sunday gathering in a single sanctuary but in

<sup>8</sup>The only other person I know to have articulated this position is E. E. Ellis, "Paul and His Opponents," in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 114. He does not, however, pursue its implications for the occasion and purpose of the letter.

<sup>9</sup>To translate *phlyaroi* "gossips," as is done in most English translations, is both misleading and prejudicial. The word means to "talk foolishness" but not in the sense that "gossip" connotes. Rather, in most of its extant uses it means to prate on about something, either in a foolish manner or with foolish ideas. In the latter sense it is picked up in polemical contexts to refer to speaking what is foolish or absurd vis-à-vis the truth—precisely Paul's condemnation of the FT in 1:6; 6:20; 2 Tim 2:23.

<sup>10</sup>This is a frequently maintained position, based on some second-century texts (see e.g. J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* [New York: Harper, 1963] 112). But those texts are not at all clear that a "ministering order" existed. Rather, they allude to their existence as a recognizable group and reflect concern for their care.

<sup>11</sup>Thus vv 3-8 set up two criteria: (1) They must be without family to support them; (2) they must be godly in their own right, noted for the good works mentioned in v 10.

many house churches, each with its own elder(s). If so, then 2:8 is a word for each of these house churches: "I want the men in every place (*en panti topō* = in every place where believers gather in and around Ephesus)<sup>12</sup> to pray (= while in the gathered assembly), lifting up holy hands (the natural posture for prayer)<sup>13</sup> without anger or disputing (i.e., unlike the F'T who are doing precisely that)." Paul's point is that he wants the various gatherings (= house churches) of God's people in Ephesus to be for prayer (= worship), not places for carrying on the speculations and controversies of the F'T.

What one can envision, therefore, on the basis of all this evidence is a scene in which the various house churches each had one or more elders. The issue therefore was not so much that a large gathered assembly was being split down the middle as that various house churches were capitulating almost altogether to its leadership that had gone astray. Some new ideas that had been circulating in the Lycus valley (Colosse, Laodicea) just a few years earlier<sup>14</sup> had made their way to Ephesus, but now as the "official" line being promulgated by some of its elders. They must be stopped, and Timothy was left in Ephesus to do it.

The purpose of 1 Timothy, then, arises out of these complexities. The letter betrays evidences everywhere that it was intended for the church itself, not just Timothy. But because of defections in the leadership Paul does not, as before, write directly to the church but to the church through Timothy. The reason for going this route would have been twofold: (1) to encourage Timothy himself to carry out this most difficult task of stopping the erring elders, who had become thoroughly disputatious, and (2) to authorize Timothy before the church to carry out his task. At the same time, of course, the church will be having the false teachers/teachings exposed before them. Thus 1 Timothy lacks the standard thanksgiving (cf. the more personal 2 Tim 1:3-5) and the personal greetings at the end, and such personal words to Timothy as do appear (e.g. 1:18-19; 4:6-16; 6:11-14) are totally subservient to his task to restore order to the church.

Such an occasion and purpose also helps to explain another phenomenon of the letter—viz., that Paul is forever calling on Timothy to teach "sound" or "healthy" doctrine, but without spelling out the nature or content of such teaching.<sup>15</sup> The reason is now obvious. The letter was written to a lifelong companion, who would not have needed such instruction. But the church had to hear that the deviations were a disease among them and that what Timothy would have to teach would be the words of health (cf. 1:10). Just as in 1 Cor 4:17, Timothy was there to remind the church of Paul's words. The letter that would so authorize him

<sup>12</sup>This prepositional phrase could mean "everywhere" (as *NIV*), but when Paul intends that he usually says it (1 Cor 11:26; 14:33). Furthermore to universalize the prepositional phrase when the rest of the sentence so clearly fits the specific situation in Ephesus makes little sense.

<sup>13</sup>For references to prayer with uplifted hands in Judaism see *inter alia* 1 Kgs 8:54; Pss 63:4; 141:2; 2 Macc 14:32; Philo *Flaccus* 121; Josephus *Ant.* 4.40; for early Christianity see esp. Tertullian *On Prayer* 17.

<sup>14</sup>See on n. 3 above.

<sup>15</sup>This is a common objection to Pauline authorship; see e.g. how R. J. Karris begins his article, "The Background and Significance of the Polemic of the Pastoral Epistles," *JBL* 92 (1973) 549-564.

would not at the same time need a detailing of those "ways."

What is needed at this point is to trace the argument of the whole of 1 Timothy to show how it functions as a response to this proposed historical reconstruction. But that would take us in a different direction and is available in my recent commentary.<sup>16</sup> Our concern here is to examine what is said about church order in this letter in light of this understanding of the occasion and purpose of the letter.

First, it must be noted again that 1 Timothy is not intended to establish church order but to respond in a very *ad hoc* way to the Ephesian situation with its straying elders. To put that in another way: What we learn about church order in 1 Timothy is not so much organizational as reformatory. We see reflections of church structures, not organizational charts; paradigms, not imperatives; qualifications, not duties; the correcting of error and abuses, not a "how to" manual on church organization. Reconstructing church order from this epistle, therefore, falls into the same category of difficulty as the attempt to reconstruct an early Christian gathering for worship on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11-14.

Thus the church already had elders (1 Tim 5:17), but some of them were persisting in sin and needed to be publicly exposed or rebuked (5:20) so that others would take warning.<sup>17</sup> Their replacements must be proven people (5:22, 24-25; 3:4-7, 10) who have a reputation for exemplary ("blameless," 3:2, 8) behavior that in every way stands in sharp contrast to the FT. The latter forbid marriage (4:3); true elders are to be exemplary husbands and fathers (3:2, 4-5, 12).<sup>18</sup> The FT think "godliness is a means to financial gain" (6:5); true elders must not be lovers of money (3:3, 8). The FT are quarrelsome and divisive (6:4-5); true elders must be "not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome" (3:3).

Likewise with the women. It may be assumed that women functioned as proclaimers of the gospel in Ephesus, just as in other Pauline churches (1 Cor 11:4-5; Rom 16:1; Phil 4:3; cf. Priscilla in Acts). But because the young widows who are party to the FT have had a disruptive effect on this church (5:13, 15) the women are instructed to dress modestly (2:9-10; in contrast to those who have become wanton, 5:11-12), to learn in quietness (2:11-12; in contrast to those who go about from house [church?] to house saying things about which they know nothing, 5:13), and finally to marry and raise a family (2:15; 5:14), as any decent, "godly" woman in that culture should do.

However, to say that what we learn is not intentionally organizational but corrective does not mean that we cannot learn from that correction. My point is that such "instruction," as almost always in Paul, is not intentionally systematic but incidental and occasional, and we must be careful in our systematizing not to

<sup>16</sup>See n. 6 above.

<sup>17</sup>This assumes, with Kelly (*Commentary*), J. P. Meier ("*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles," *CBQ* [1973] 325-337), and others that all of 5:17-25 is dealing with the discipline and replacement of elders, against Lock (*Commentary*, ICC), Dibelius-Conzelmann (*Commentary*, Hermeneia), and others who think vv 20-25 have to do with the restoration of penitent sinners.

<sup>18</sup>It is tempting, on the basis of 2:9-10; 3:2; 5:11-15; 2 Tim 3:6-7 and the reminders of Timothy that he must keep himself pure (1 Tim 5:2, 22), to see a sexual liaison between the FT and the younger widows. But the suggestion is somewhat speculative.

overlook the occasional nature of the material as it comes to us. What, then, may we say with a high degree of certainty about church order from the PE?

(1) It is a mistaken notion to view Timothy or Titus as model pastors for a local church. The letters simply have no such intent. Although it is true that Timothy and Titus carry full apostolic authority, in both cases they are itinerants on special assignment who are there as Paul's apostolic delegates, not as permanent resident pastors. This is a far cry from Timothy's role in Ephesus, and Titus' in the churches of Crete, and that of Ignatius in Antioch or Polycarp in Smyrna fifty years later.

Timothy, it is true, is called upon to set an example for Christian behavior (4:12), but this is exactly the role Paul had in his churches. They were to learn the "ways" of Christ by following the apostolic model (2 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). Both Timothy and Titus are expected to teach, exhort and rebuke, of course, which would also be the function of the elders after Paul and his itinerant co-workers had left. But these were first of all apostolic functions.

(2) Responsibility for leadership in local churches (per town or, as is likely in larger cities like Ephesus, per house church) was from the beginning in the hands of several people, who apparently had been appointed by the apostle and his co-workers (cf. Acts 14:23). In the earliest letters these people are styled *hoi proistamenoi* (1 Thess 5:12; Rom 12:8), language still being used at the time of the PE (1 Tim 3:5; 5:17). Interestingly, however, despite all the difficulties in some of these churches, none of the letters is ever addressed to these people, nor are they ever given charge to set the church in order or withstand error. In Phil 1:1 Paul for the first time addresses both the church and its (plural) leaders (*episkopoi*, "overseers," and *diakonoi*, "deacons," the identical words used in 1 Tim 3:2, 8; cf. Titus 1:7). Apart from this reference we would not have otherwise known of their earlier existence. But because of such a reference we may properly assume that other churches also had such plural leadership. It should be finally noted that in none of the earlier letters does the term "elder" (*presbyteros*) appear.

The evidence that emerges in the PE corresponds very closely to this state of affairs. Although some have argued that Timothy and Titus were to appoint a single *episkopos*, under whom there would be a group of deacons, exegesis of the key passages (1 Tim 3:1-2, 8; 5:17; Titus 1:5-7) and a comparison with Acts 20:17, 28 indicates otherwise.

In all cases leadership was plural. These leaders are called elders in 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5. They were to be appointed in Crete by Titus but had been appointed some years earlier in Ephesus, probably by Paul himself. The term "elders" is probably a covering term for both overseers and deacons. In any case the grammar of Titus 1:5, 7 demands that "elder" and "overseer" are interchangeable terms (as in Acts 20:17, 28), but they are not thereby necessarily coextensive.<sup>19</sup>

(3) What were the duties of such elders? At this point our information is limited, precisely because this was not Paul's concern. Two things seem certain: (a) The elders called overseers were responsible for teaching (1 Tim 3:3; 5:17; Titus

<sup>19</sup>For an excellent recent discussion of these matters see R. E. Brown, "Episkopē and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence," *TS* 41 (1980) 322-338.

1:9), for which they were to receive remuneration (1 Tim 5:17);<sup>20</sup> (b) the elders together were responsible for “managing” or “caring for” the local church (see 1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17), whatever that might have involved at that time in its history. Beyond that, everything is speculative.

(4) But we do learn something about their qualifications for appointment (or in 1 Timothy perhaps the “yardstick” against which existing elders were to be measured). They must not be new converts (3:6; 5:22). Indeed Paul has been burned badly enough by the present defecting elders that Timothy is to exercise great patience in appointing their replacements (vv 24-25). Above all they must be exemplary family men, which is what the difficult “husband of one wife” (3:2, 12; Titus 1:6) must at least mean, although it also is very likely a frowning upon second marriages of any kind.<sup>21</sup> The reason for this emphasis is twofold: (a) It stands as the antithesis to the F’T; (b) such people who do their “home work” well in the basic Christian community, the family, have already qualified themselves for God’s extended family, the church.

When such leaders sin or go astray they are to be disciplined. No unsupported charge may be brought against anyone (5:19), but there must be public rebuke of those who persist (5:20).

(5) It is not at all clear that there were “orders” of women’s ministries, including widows. In the commentary I argue that there were women who served the church in some capacity, perhaps including leadership (1 Tim 3:11), but that there was no order of widows, who were enrolled and had prescribed duties.<sup>22</sup>

(6) What seems certain in all of this is that the church order of the PE fits

<sup>20</sup>The phrase “double honor” almost certainly means “the same honor afforded others, plus a stipend.”

<sup>21</sup>This is one of the truly difficult phrases in the PE (cf. 5:9 of the “true” widows; Titus 1:6). There are at least four options: (1) It is requiring that the overseer be married. Support is found in the fact that the false teachers are forbidding marriage and that Paul urges marriage for the wayward widows (5:14; cf. 2:15). But against it is (a) it emphasizes “wife,” while the text emphasizes “one”; (b) the fact that Paul, and most likely Timothy, were not married; (c) it stands in contradiction to 1 Cor 7:25-38. Besides, it was a cultural presupposition that most people would be married. (2) It prohibits polygamy. This correctly emphasizes the “one wife” aspect, but polygamy was such a rare feature of pagan society that such a prohibition would function as a near irrelevancy. Moreover it would not seem to fit the identical phrase used of the widows in 5:9. (3) It prohibits second marriages (RSV, “married only once”). Such an interpretation is supported by many of the data: (a) It would fit the widow especially; (b) all kinds of inscriptional evidence praises women (especially, although sometimes men) who were “married only once” and remained “faithful” to that marriage after one’s partner had died. (See M. Lightman and W. Ziesel, “Univera: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society,” *CH* 46 [1977] 19-32.) This view would then prohibit second marriages after death, but it would also obviously—perhaps especially—prohibit divorce and remarriage. Some scholars (e.g. Hanson) would make it refer only to the latter. (4) It requires marital fidelity to one wife (cf. *NEB*: “faithful to his one wife”; see C. H. Dodd, “New Testament Translation Problems II,” *BibTr* 28 [1977] 112-116). In this view the church leader is required to live an exemplary married life (marriage is assumed), faithful to his one wife in a culture where marital infidelity was common and at times assumed. It would of course also rule out polygamy and divorce and remarriage, but it would not necessarily rule out the remarriage of a widower (although that would still not be the Pauline ideal; cf. 1 Cor 7:8-9, 39-40). Although there is much to be said for either understanding of option 3, the concern that the Church’s leaders live exemplary married lives seems best to fit the context—given the apparently low view of marriage and family on the part of the false teachers (4:3).

<sup>22</sup>Although there is a genuine concern for the care of “true” widows—i.e., those without children—the great urgency of 5:3-16 is with the younger widows who had “gone astray after Satan.”



easily with what one finds in the other Pauline letters and Acts. Contrariwise it is unlike the Ignatian epistles both in spirit and in details. This in turn is an argument for their authenticity, not against it.

Thus we do not learn nearly as much as we should have liked. But we do learn quite a bit. The question before us now is how what we learn, as over against what we are specifically taught or commanded, functions as God's Word for us.

The matter of the relevance of these conclusions to the present scene is at once more pressing and more problematic—and requires another full-length paper far beyond the limitations of this one. Part of the difficulty, of course, stems from the fractured nature of the twentieth-century Church. But part of it is also due to inconsistent or assumed hermeneutics at a much deeper level than the mere application or nonapplication of a given text to a given situation. My present concerns lie with these deeper levels, which can only be lightly touched on here.

(1) At the heart of the question of church order, more than for many issues, is the prior question of the role of tradition (or Church) in interpretation. At issue is the whole question of authority structures and how one understands "apostolic succession," especially so for Protestants of a more congregational or presbyterian church order.

For Roman Catholicism this issue has long ago been resolved. The apostolic succession, meaning the authority of the apostles, resides with the clergy and is represented at the local level by the parish priest. Most Protestants, chiefly because of what they see as abuses of the use of tradition (which is seen at times not simply to interpret Scripture, or to provide help where Scripture is silent, but actually to contravene Scripture), reject the apostolic succession as having to do with persons or structures and see it as resting in the truth of the gospel itself. Although it is seldom put this way, the NT functions for Protestants as the apostolic succession.

But such a view also has its inherent weaknesses—and abuses. For example, although most Protestants in theory deny apostolic succession to reside in its clergy, *de facto* it is practiced in vigorous and sometimes devastating ways—in the "one-man show" of many denominational churches or in the little dictatorships in other (especially "independent") churches. And how did such a pluralism of papacies emerge? Basically from two sources (not to mention the fallenness of the clergy whose egos often love such power): (a) from the fact that the local pastor is so often seen (and often sees him/herself) as the authoritative interpreter of the "sole authority"—Scripture; (b) from the pastor's functioning in the role of authority, thus assuming the mantle of Paul or of a Timothy or Titus. Hence it is based strictly on the use of a paradigm, the validity of which is scarcely ever questioned. Here Protestant "tradition" has the final say.

But on what hermeneutical grounds does one justify the use of this paradigm? Why not the real paradigm of 1 Timothy—plural leadership at the local level? Or, to put this whole question at a different hermeneutical level altogether, if the NT is one's "sole authority" and that authority does not in fact teach anything directly about church order at the local level, then one might rightly ask whether there is a normative church order. If the best one has is paradigms, then it is certainly arguable that whatever paradigm one goes with it should minimize the

potentiality of individual overlordship or authoritarianism and maximize accountability and servanthood.

(2) The other hermeneutical difficulty, related in part to the previous one, has to do with the application or nonapplication of specific texts. In its basic form the question is this: How do these *ad hoc* documents, inspired of the Spirit to address and correct a singular historical situation, function by that same Spirit as eternal Word for us? As I have pointed out elsewhere, the great problem here is with consistency; and even though common sense keeps us from going too far afield, our individual "common sense" is not always common, since it is informed by diverse cultural, theological and ecclesiastical traditions.<sup>23</sup>

In light of the earlier conclusions about church order in 1 Timothy, this hermeneutical question might be rephrased: How does what we learn from a text that is not intended specifically to teach church order function for us today? Or to put it even more specifically: Do imperatives directed toward the church in Ephesus in A.D. 62, to correct abuses of wayward elders, function as eternal norms, obligatory in every culture in every age in an absolute way?

The problem here is twofold: (a) our own inconsistencies; (b) difficulties created by exegetical ambiguity. For example: (1) A considerable literature has emerged over 1 Tim 2:11-12, pro and con, as to whether women may teach, preach, or be ordained. But there is not a single piece that argues from 5:3-16 that the church should care for its over-sixty widows or require the younger ones to be married. One can understand the reasons for this, of course. Our agendas have been set by our own cultural or existential urgencies. But the inconsistency is there. To get those who are doing battle over 2:11-12 to own up to it is extremely difficult. (2) Both of these texts can also serve to illustrate the problem of exegetical ambiguity. So also with the requirement in 3:2, 12 that the church leader be "the husband of one wife." How, for example, can one deny ministry to people who were divorced and remarried before becoming believers, on the basis of this text, yet allow former adulterers to serve, who may have lived with several women without legally marrying them, and not even take into consideration that in this case the text also probably prohibits remarriage of widows/widowers? The very exegetical ambiguity or uncertainty needs hermeneutical discussion—that is, how does it apply if we cannot even be sure of what it means?

Another form of this ambiguity is related to the reality of Scripture's broader witness in some cases. For example, Paul's words in 2:11-12 or 5:14 must be wrestled with respectively in light of Phil 4:3 or 1 Cor 7:8-9, 39-40, for example. The very differences reflected in these texts point to their *ad hoc* nature, which probably in turn argues for more flexibility and less rigidity than one sometimes finds in the literature.

Back, then, to our question. Do such texts have a kind of absolute normativeness? If so, how so? And what do we do with the magnitude of our disobedience to those texts that are not urgent to us?

I would argue that the answer lies in the area of our obedience to the point of the text, its "spirit" if you will, even if at times the specifics are not followed to

<sup>23</sup>See G. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 37-71.

the "letter." This is how all of us treat 1 Tim 6:1-2—although such was not always the case.<sup>24</sup> This is probably how many would argue that they are obeying 5:3-16—although I for one would like to probe a bit more here. Why not, then, with 2:11-12, since all do it with the preceding vv 9-10?

Let me say finally to those who see the raising of questions this way as a ploy to get around something: Such is not the case. My hermeneutical concern is quite the opposite: obedience. But I also want greater hermeneutical consistency. We who take Scripture seriously as Word of God must stop our "pick and choose" approach to obedience, or at least articulate reasons for it.

<sup>24</sup>The arguments of J. H. Hopkins, A. T. Bledsoe, T. Stringfellow and C. B. Hodge, among others, for a Biblical base for slavery are remarkably—and frighteningly—similar to those who oppose women's ordination; see especially W. M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983).