

Coherence and Authorship in 1 Timothy

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Abstract: *This brief essay surveys the move away from confidence in the Pauline authorship towards increasing marginalization of all the Pastoral Epistles today. Critics of Schleiermacher in the 1800's warned that his arguments against 1 Timothy would lead to further drift from orthodoxy. Though those critiques were derided at the time, the warnings have proven true. We need a renewed evaluation of what has been missed in evangelical scholarship by too easily leaving the Pastoral Epistles out of our conversations on Paul.*

Since the work of Schleiermacher in the early 19th century the coherence and authorship of 1 Timothy has been a central issue in the study of the Pastoral Epistles (PE).¹ Until the 19th century, the authenticity of these letters had been undisputed. Schleiermacher, however, singled out 1 Timothy for criticism, arguing that 1 Timothy was put together using material from 2 Timothy and Titus, which he considered genuine. Even when others (particularly Eichhorn) took his thesis further to challenge the authenticity of the rest of the Pastorals, Schleiermacher held to his original position.

The inauthenticity of 1 Timothy has again remained certain for me in the interpretation; but likewise the authenticity of 2 Timothy and Titus. It seems to me that Eichhorn is entirely frivolous here.²

I know of nothing at all to raise against Titus; I have reservations about 2 Timothy, but which are not strong enough to lead to a decision; 1 Timothy, however, cannot be defended, even if I wanted to.³

What convinced Schleiermacher were not historical difficulties but linguistic observations, non-Pauline phrases, hapaxlegomena, and “an incoherent, discontinuous train of

¹ Apparently J. E. C. Schmidt was first in challenging 1 Timothy in his *Historical-Critical Introduction to the New Testament* in 1804/5. But it was Schleiermacher's *Über den sogenannten ersten Brief des Paulos an den Timotheos. Ein kritisches Sendschreibung an J. C. Gass* (reprinted in Schleiermacher's *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol 1/2, pp. 221-320) which really stirred up the conversation in 1807.

² In a letter cited in Hermann Patsch, “The Fear of Deutero-Paulinism: The Reception of Friedrich Schleiermacher's ‘Critical Open Letter’ concerning 1 Timothy,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 6 (1999): 24, n. 56.

³ In a letter cited in Patsch, 24, n. 56

thought.”⁴ Thus this issue of coherence has been a part of the authorship conversation from the beginning.

I have elsewhere sought to demonstrate the coherent, continuous train of thought present in 1 Timothy and have surveyed the works of others who have contributed to this more positive reading of 1 Timothy (as well as the other Pastorals).⁵ Rather than repeat that work here, my point is to trace the impact of the incoherence and inauthenticity argument.

The high stakes of this authorship and coherence discussion were noted early on. An unsigned review of Schleiermacher from 1809, said:

Among the most recent appearances in the area of theological literature, hardly any has stirred up more attention or higher interest than the writing by the discerning Schleiermacher, through which a letter of the New Testament, the first letter of Paul to Timothy, generally held until now—one can definitely say—to be doubtlessly authentic, is declared to be spurious. If this thesis was in fact a thunderbolt for many theologians (we have had sufficient opportunity to observe it), even more were shaken up because ... this onset of destruction brings something even worse to fear, namely, a continuation and, in so far as one does not forcefully put a stop to it, a tragic end for the entire theological foundation firmly regarded as unshakable.⁶

Reviewers stated their concern that such arguments as Schleiermacher’s would lead to the eroding of biblical confidence and the dismissal of more and more New Testament (NT) books. Critical scholars have derided their fears, but the fact is that the fears have come true such that denying the authenticity of 1 Timothy does not raise alarms as it did in the early 1800’s. In fact, for most scholars the inauthenticity of the PE is assumed, and Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians are also commonly dismissed. But F. C. Baur assured us we could give up the

⁴ Patsch, 5.

⁵ Ray Van Neste, “Structure and Cohesion in the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, ed. Kostenberger and Wilder (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010). See also *Cohesion and Structure in the Pastoral Epistles* (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

⁶ Cited in Patsch, 20.

canonicity of the Pastorals and “other smaller letters” without endangering the historical foundation of Christianity.⁷

Marginalization

And, yet, what has happened? Can we deny that the fears of Schleiermacher’s critics have come true? He challenged only one letter, but was unable to keep others from rejecting 2 Timothy and Titus as well. Before long Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians also became suspect. But of all the NT letters, the Pastorals are the most suspect. They are the “ugly ducklings” of NT scholarship. While they have not been officially removed from the canon, functionally one might wonder if they have. Of course Houghton Mifflin has published a *New New Testament* which adds books to the canon, so maybe we are not too far from someone trying to remove the Pastorals.

Luke Timothy Johnson has commented perceptively on this issue, stating, “If not Pauline, then the letters were not considered authoritative, and were increasingly moved to the edge or even out of the canon of Scripture.”⁸ Noting how modern interpreters of Paul commonly give no attention to the Pastorals although they do interact with Gnostic writings and apocryphal writings, Johnson quips, “Out of Paul means out of canon, and even out of mind!”⁹ Karl Donfried, not a supporter of Pauline authorship, affirms Johnson’s point noting that the Pastorals have been “disenfranchised” in much of mainline Protestantism and suggests this process has

⁷ F. C. Baur, “Abenöthigte Erklärung,” *TZT* 3 (1836): 208 (also in his *Werke*, vol. III, p. 296); cited by Ellis, E. Earle. “Pseudonymity and Canonicity of New Testament Documents.” Pages 212-24 in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honour of Ralph P. Martin*. Edited by Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige. JSNTSup 87. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, “First Timothy 1,1-20: The Shape of the Struggle,” in *1 Timothy Reconsidered*, ed. Karl Paul Donfried (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2008), 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 11.

been “facilitated by much feminist biblical scholarship.”¹⁰ Brevard Childs said attempts to interpret the PE in light of a fictitious setting “rendered mute” the “kerygmatic witness of the text.”¹¹

So, the issue has moved beyond merely authorship to whether or not the Pastoral Epistles are authentically Pauline to whether or not they are acceptable. This is recognized even by a number of scholars who do not accept Pauline authorship. It seems that the charge of authenticity was the crack which allowed others to attack these letters for being out of step with contemporary mores.

In fact, Dennis Ronald MacDonald is concerned to protect us from the negative impact of the Pastoral Epistles.

I am convinced that the Pastoral Epistles have distorted our image of Paul, even for those of us who recognize them as pseudonymous. Scholars still too often assume that the Pastoral Epistles were more or less standard expressions of Paulinism for post-Pauline churches. But this fails to account for the tremendous diversity of ways the early church remembered the apostle, and consequently we have too often seen the apostle of freedom as the priest of social convention.¹²

MacDonald laments the “domestication of Paul” which he believes the Pastorals have effected.

Gerd Theissen bluntly states:

Without the Pastorals the New Testament would be much more friendly to women. The Pastorals alter the image of Paul in some places, contrary to the historical Paul. The exaltation of teaching and the fundamental affirmation of creation link them to the authentic Paul, but the anti-ascetic Paul is unhistorical. The historical Paul valued celibacy more highly than marriage. The Pastorals almost attempt to impose a kind of marriage obligation. The patriarchal Paul thus cannot be found in the historical Paul: the expulsion of women from community leadership has no basis in the Pauline letters, which

¹⁰ Karl P. Donfried, “Rethinking Scholarly Approaches to 1 Timothy,” in *1 Timothy Reconsidered*, ed. Karl Paul Donfried (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2008), 154.

¹¹ Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 383.

¹² Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 15.

often reveal a great deal of significance on the part of women in the building up of communities.¹³

Elsa Tamez finds certain texts in 1 Timothy, like 4:1-3 which rebukes false teachers, “worrisome” because they “pass judgment with intolerance on different customs and theological thoughts.”¹⁴ The foreword for the *New New Testament* describes this text as “thoroughly nasty language.” Other texts (e.g., qualities for leaders in 1 Tim 3:1-7) according to Tamez “would be uncomfortable for the Christian communities that use a democratic model.”¹⁵ Therefore, Tamez says we must use a different hermeneutic with 1 Timothy, a hermeneutic which will allow us “the freedom not to accept its [the text’s] declarations,” to “dissent from certain affirmations of the text that contradict the gospel itself.”¹⁶ She acknowledges her reworking of the text will be subjective, but she is confident that the result will be “much richer and appropriate for the popular, pastoral, or community reading of the Bible.”¹⁷

Do we stand under the text or over it? This is the sort of scholarship which led Søren Kierkegaard, who lived during the rise of critical biblical scholarship, to write his provocative essay, “Kill the Commentators!” The essay is admittedly over the top, but it provides a useful challenge to those of us who are involved in biblical scholarship. Kierkegaard wrote:

Today’s mass of Bible interpreters have damaged, more than they have helped, our understanding of the Bible. ..

Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is the Church’s prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh, priceless scholarship, what

¹³ Gerd Theissen. *The New Testament: A Literary History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 123.

¹⁴ Elsa Tamez, *Struggles for Power in Early Christianity: A Study of the First Letter to Timothy* (New York: Orbis, 2007), xviii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xix. She goes on to say, “It is not a matter of accepting what is said, but of understanding and then dissenting from what is read if it does not reflect the principles of the gospel of the kingdom” (xxi).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.

would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament...

Praise be to everyone who works to consolidate the reputation of Christian scholarship, which helps to restrain the New Testament, this confounded book which would one, two, three, run us all down if it got loose (that is, if Christian scholarship did not restrain it).¹⁸

I will put my cards on the table. Too often the objections against the Pastorals in general and 1 Timothy specifically seem to me like efforts to protect ourselves from the statements made in these texts. Thus, Jay Twomey, who doesn't believe the PE are from Paul, nonetheless says he has to acknowledge a "curious historical similarity" between the rejection of the Pastorals by Marcion and the rejection by modern critical scholars. Both groups, says Twomey, "have favored what they see as the striking newness of Paul, with his ambitious and utterly radical project."¹⁹ Both groups have developed a vision of Paul and find that the Pastoral Epistles do not fit that vision. Rather than adjust their vision of Paul to accommodate more of the biblical data, they reject the biblical data in order to accommodate their view of Paul.²⁰

Strikingly, Michael Legaspi, in his provocative book, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, says cultural accommodation of the Bible is an essential part of the project of modern biblical studies. Coming out of the Enlightenment, modern universities sought to recapture some value from the Bible by disengaging biblical interpretation from confessional

¹⁸ "Kill the Commentators!" in *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, ed. Charles E. Moore (Farmington, PA: Bruderhof Foundation, 2002), 199, 201, 202.

¹⁹ Twomey, 4. He goes on to say, "They have compared the innovation of Paul to the traditionalism of the Pastor, and they have found the Pastor wanting."

²⁰ Bart Ehrman is another example, stating, "nowhere in the New Testament is there a more protoorthodox Paul than in these Pastoral Epistles, with their stress on the election of worthy men as bishops and deacons and their opposition to false 'gnosis' and baseless 'mythological speculation' (cf. 1 Tim 1:4, 6:20). Here is a forged Paul for a proto-orthodoxy forging ahead, seeking to overcome all heretical opposition" (Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* [New York: Oxford, 2003], 240).

parameters and producing a new, cultural Bible shorn of scriptural (binding authority over life) properties.²¹

They introduced a historical disjunction that allowed them to operate on the Bible as an inert and separated body of tradition. They used historical research to write the Bible's death certificate while opening, simultaneously, a new avenue for recovering the biblical writings as ancient cultural products capable of reinforcing the values and aims of a new sociopolitical order. The Bible, once decomposed, could be used to fertilize modern culture.²²

We must move forward with integrating the PE into our study and understanding of Paul, the New Testament, and the Bible. Evangelicals need this because too often we have been cowed into doing theology with part of Paul tied behind our back, just in order to gain a hearing at the larger academic table. We believe it is all authentic, so let us use it. Our goal should be to do proper theology, and our bracketing out of certain portions of Scripture is preventing us from this goal. We need to re-engage these letters appreciating how much they contribute to the message of the New Testament. So many scholars are simply unaware of the breadth of their message. A few years ago I was speaking with an established Christian ethicist, and I suggested the PE were a rich resource for thinking through Christian ethics. He said, "Well, I guess for pastoral ethics." No! These letters are not simply, or even primarily, about how pastors should behave. They are wrapped up with how Christians should live, what life should look like once impacted by the gospel. First Timothy 1:5 clearly states the ethical purpose of apostolic instruction: "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."²³ Paul wrote 1 Timothy "so that ... you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God" (1 Tim 3:14-15), and "one" in the context refers to Christians in general. The letter focuses on

²¹ Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 6.

²² Legaspi, 5.

²³ Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV.

instruction for the church according to age and gender groups as well as instruction for widows and the wealthy.²⁴

We need a thoroughgoing project of asking what we have missed in the last century or two as NT scholarship has advanced without including the PE in our understanding of Paul. How has our view of Paul been warped by this? What weaknesses has this created in our understanding? What would be the impact on the New Perspective discussion if Titus 3 were taken seriously as Pauline? I am pursuing this question and I invite you to join me.

Let us not perpetuate the type of scholarship Kierkegaard appropriately derided. Let us take the whole counsel of God embracing the sharp edges and pursue truth.

²⁴ Similarly the concern in Titus is behavior which denies one's profession of faith (1:16) and behavior which is fitting for (i.e., which affirms) such a claim to know God (2:1-10).