

THE BOOK OF 1 TIMOTHY

ORIENTING DATA FOR 1 TIMOTHY

- **Content:** an indictment of some false teachers—their character and teachings—with instructions on various community matters these teachers have brought to crisis, interspersed with words of encouragement to Timothy
- **Author:** the apostle Paul (although doubted by many)
- **Date:** A.D. 62–63, from Macedonia (probably Philippi or Thessalonica), apparently after his (expected) release from the imprisonment noted in Philippians 1:13 and 2:23–24
- **Recipient(s):** Timothy, a longtime, younger companion of Paul; and (ultimately) the church in Ephesus (the grace-benediction in 6:21 is plural)
- **Occasion:** Paul has left Timothy in charge of a very difficult situation in the church in Ephesus, where false teachers (probably local elders) are leading some house churches astray; Paul writes to the whole church through Timothy in order to strengthen Timothy's hand in stopping these straying elders and some younger widows who have followed them
- **Emphases:** the truth of the gospel as God's mercy shown toward all people; character qualifications for church leadership; speculative teachings, asceticism, and love of controversy and money disqualify one from church leadership; Timothy, by holding fast to the gospel, should model genuine Christian character and leadership

OVERVIEW OF 1 TIMOTHY

The letters to Timothy and Titus have long been called the Pastoral Epistles, under the assumption that they are intended to give instructions to young pastors on church order. But that tends both to read later concerns back into these letters and to lump them together in a way that loses their individual (and quite different) character and life setting. This letter is the first of the three, written soon after Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus. Having disfellowshipped the ringleaders of the false teaching (1:19–20), he left Timothy there while he went on to Macedonia, charging him to stop “certain persons [from teaching] false doctrines any longer” (1:3).

The letter fluctuates between words to the *church* through Timothy and words to *Timothy* himself, although even these latter are intended to be overheard by the church. Much of the letter points out the follies of the false teachers/teaching (1:4–10, 19b–20; 4:1–3, 7; 6:3–10, 20–21). The words to Timothy (1:3, 18–19a; 4:6–16; 6:11–16, 20–21) charge him with regard to his duties and encourage him and strengthen his hand before the community to carry out these (sometimes unpleasant) duties. These two matters merge in the final charge to Timothy in

6:20–21. The rest of the letter deals with community matters, obviously deeply influenced by the false teaching—matters such as the believers’ gathering for prayer and teaching (2:1–15); qualifications for, and replacement of, leaders (3:1–13; 5:17–25); caring for older widows, but urging younger ones to marry (5:3–16); attitudes of slaves toward masters (6:1–2).

Despite the many words directed personally to Timothy, this letter is all business, as is made clear by a lack of both the ordinary thanksgiving and prayer reports that begin Paul’s letters (cf. 2 Timothy) and the greetings to and from friends that conclude them (again, cf. 2 Timothy).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 1 TIMOTHY

As you read, note especially what Paul says about the false teachers and their teaching—since concern about them appears to lie behind every word in this letter. There are good reasons to assume that these teachers were local elders who had embraced some ideas that are quite incompatible with the gospel of grace (1:11–17): First, unlike the other letters of Paul that deal with false teachers (2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians), 1 Timothy gives no hint that these teachers might be outsiders. Second, Paul has already excommunicated two of them, clearly insiders (1 Tim 1:19–20), and the later evidence from 2 Timothy 2:17–18 indicates that one of them (Hymenaeus) refused to leave (note that he is named first both times, implying that he is the ringleader). Now, third, read Paul’s address to the elders of this church in Acts 20:17–35, and note that, some five years or so earlier, Paul had predicted this very thing would happen (vv. 29–30, that from among their own number some would arise and distort the truth).

If you add one additional factor, that these elders have made use of some younger widows who have opened their homes to their novelties—as 2 Timothy 3:6–7 states—then the whole letter falls into place. Note how these factors together explain (1) why Paul writes to Timothy, and not to the church as in other such cases, since his letter would not get a hearing in the hands of these elders; at the same time Paul is authorizing Timothy before the church to see that these elders are replaced by people with proper qualifications; (2) why he gives careful instructions, not about the duties of elders, but about their qualifications; (3) why he gives such detailed instructions about caring for older widows, while urging the younger ones, some of whom have already gone astray after Satan (1 Tim 5:15), to marry—against his general advice in 1 Corinthians 7:40—and why he forbids them to teach in this setting (1 Tim 2:11–15); and (4) why, although his primary concern is for the gospel (1:11), Paul gives so little of its content in this letter—since Timothy does not need instruction here—and why on the other hand so much is said about the nature of the false teaching.

The false teaching seems to be a mixture of things Jewish and Greek. Errantly based on the law (1:7), it was full of Old Testament speculations (“myths and endless [wearisome] genealogies,” 1:4); it was being presented as *gnōsis* (“knowledge,” 6:20) and appeared to have an esoteric and exclusivistic appeal (1:4–7; note in 2:1–7 and 4:10 that God wants *all people* to be saved), which included a false asceticism that denied the goodness of creation (4:3–5; perhaps 5:23). Beyond their teaching, Paul indicts the teachers for their love of controversies, including battles over words (1:6; 6:4), and especially for their greed (6:5–10; cf. 3:3, “not a lover of money”).

All in all, Paul has left Timothy with a very difficult assignment—which seems not to have been altogether successful in light of the evidence of 2 Timothy—making the words to Timothy

all the more poignant. You might try to put yourself in Timothy's shoes as you read through the letter.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 373–375.