



## *The First Letter of Paul to* **Timothy**

**THE FIRST OF THE PASTORAL EPISTLES** is addressed to Timothy, Paul's coworker ("my loyal child in the faith," 1 Tim 1:2). In it, Paul describes his personal life as he ministers to other Christians. Some readers of 1 Timothy have criticized the letter because it appears to bow down to the surrounding culture. For example, it is urged that Christian women be silent and not teach (2:11-15), and that Christian slaves be subservient (6:1-2). These statements (which seem to refer to a later period of the church), differences in style and theological terms, and the lack of support in Acts (19:22) regarding Paul's request to Timothy "to remain in Ephesus" (1:3) have led some scholars to conclude that Paul could never have written this letter and to date it as late as the second century CE. Scholars who support Paul's authorship date it during his lifetime, usually between 62 and 64, assuming it was written after Paul was released from prison in Rome (see Acts 28:30-31) and before he was imprisoned a final time in Rome.

It is a letter of paradoxes, with positive exhortations to some and negative judgments to others (for example, 1:18-20). It advances love and mercy as well as orthodoxy.

The letter purports to be written by Paul to Timothy—that is, by one multicultural person to another multicultural person, for the sake of a multicultural church. Paul, a Jew and zealous enforcer of Jewish law, was reared in Tarsus, outside Judea, in the Diaspora. Tarsus, in Asia Minor, represented a harmonious balance of East and West; both Greek and Aramaic were spoken there. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's parents were Roman citizens (Acts 22:28). Thus, Paul was reared in a multicultural setting, yet he traveled to Jerusalem to learn rabbinic law (Acts 22:3). Paul's coworker, Timothy, is a Jew on his mother's side, but his father is a Gentile (1 Tim 1:2; see Acts 16:1-3). He is also from Asia Minor (Lystra).

Ephesus (1:3) was itself a multicultural city. It was the greatest city of the province of Asia, set at a key intersection for trade. It had a synagogue (Acts 19:8) and Jews who were Roman citizens. Yet Ephesus also was well known for the study and practice of magic (Acts 19:18-19) and for the temple of the goddess Artemis, the largest temple of the ancient world. In the Roman period, the worship of Artemis represented a syncretistic (that is, a mixed or blended) belief system.

Although Paul and Timothy could be described as multicultural people living in multicultural settings, the doctrines to which Paul is represented here as urging Timothy to hold fast are not at all syncretistic (1:3-7; 6:3). In this letter of lessons in church guidance and opposition to false teachings, truth is an important theme, as is a "healthy" or "wholesome teaching" (phrases repeated throughout the letter). Elders or overseers are important for teaching truth (1:3; 3:2; 5:17). Some teachers at Ephesus were promoting myths, endless genealogies, speculations, fruitless discussions,



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godless chatter, and contradictions (1:3-6; 4:7; 6:3-4, 20). Timothy is urged to guard the message he has received and avoid false knowledge (6:20).

As a multicultural person myself (my mother is from Puerto Rico, my father is from the Netherlands, and I was born and reared in the Dominican Republic, but I have lived in the United States since sixth grade), I can affirm the multicultural aspect of the communication in 1 Timothy. Although the accommodation to the larger culture's codes of subordination poses a challenge for many today, we can regard the Paul who speaks here and the Timothy who is addressed as constructing a bridge to reach others in their different cultures. First, they affirm that despite differences among people, all can have the same Savior (God is "our Savior" and Jesus "our hope," 1:1). God bridges all cultures and desires everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1:15; 2:3-6; 4:10). Second, prayer is for everyone, no matter their social, political, or economic class (2:1-2). The author even advocated that older widows be part of a praying order (5:5). Third, despite different cultures, all can share similar values. The descriptions for overseers (bishop) and ministers (deacons) are built on such widely accepted character attributes as godliness, not being quarrelsome, not loving money, not living for pleasure, and not being a gossip (2:2, 8-10; 3:2-8; 4:7-8; 5:6, 11, 13; 6:2-3, 5-10, 17-18). Being "above reproach" (3:2, 7; 5:7, 14, 25) would help believers lead a "quiet and peaceable life" (2:2) so that more of the Greek and Jewish people might indeed "come to the knowledge of the truth" (2:4). This letter holds firm on the basic truths of the gospel yet encourages the sorts of virtues that would help advance the proclamation of the gospel in the larger culture.

— *Aída Besançon Spencer*



**I** Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

**2** To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

**3** I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine,<sup>4</sup> and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training<sup>a</sup> that

is known by faith.<sup>5</sup> But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.<sup>6</sup> Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk,<sup>7</sup> desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

**8** Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately.<sup>9</sup> This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers,

<sup>a</sup> Or *plan*