

Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles

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In the last few years, several major commentaries and monographs on the Pastoral Epistles have been published.¹ It seems appropriate to ask what light these recent works have shed on the study of this group of writings. Owing to space limitations we will limit our discussion to several of the major hermeneutical and exegetical challenges with which the modern interpreter is confronted in his or her study of the Pastoral Epistles.²

Hermeneutical Challenges

Authorship

The authorship of the Pastoral Epistles continues to be a major topic of scholarly debate. The authenticity of Paul's correspondence with Timothy and Titus went largely unchallenged until the nineteenth century.³ Since then, an increasing number of scholars have claimed that the Pastorals are an instance of pseudonymous writing in which a later follower attributes his own work to his revered teacher in order to perpetrate that person's teachings and influence.⁴ The issue is primarily a historical one. The following interrelated questions require adjudication:

1. Is pseudonymous letter-writing attested in the first century?

¹ See esp. the commentaries by I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999); William D. Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000); and Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). I have reviewed these three commentaries in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 3 (2001) 550–553; 45, no. 2 (2002) 365–366; and 44, no. 3 (2001) 549–550, which are now posted on my website, www.ajkostenberger.com.

² For a more detailed exegetical treatment see my forthcoming commentary on the Pastoral epistles in the *New Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. David Garland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan).

³ For brief surveys, see Raymond F. Collins, *Letters That Paul Did Not Write* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988) 89–90, who names as the earliest challengers of the Pastorals' authenticity Schmidt (1804), Schleiermacher (1807), Eichhorn (1812), Baur (1835), and later Holtzmann (1885); and E. Earle Ellis, "Pastoral Letters," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 659.

⁴ See the thorough survey and adjudication in Terry L. Wilder, "Pseudonymity and the New Testament," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and D. S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001).

2. If so, was such a practice ethically unobjectionable and devoid of deceptive intent or not?⁵
3. Could pseudonymous letters have been acceptable to the early church?
4. If so, is pseudonymity more plausible than authenticity in the case of the Pastorals?⁶

I. H. Marshall has recently addressed these issues and come to the conclusion that “the way in which the thought [in the Pastorals] is expressed, both linguistically and theologically, poses great problems . . . which seems to make it unlikely that he [Paul] himself wrote in these terms to trusted colleagues.”⁷ For this reason Marshall rejects the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals. At the same time, however, Marshall finds the theory of pseudonymity wanting owing to the deceptive intent inevitably involved in such a practice.⁸ In an effort to find a middle way between the (for him) Scylla of Pauline authorship and Charybdis of pseudonymity, Marshall has coined a view he labels “allonymity” or “allepigraphy,” according to which “somebody close to a dead person continued to write as (they thought that) he would have done.”⁹ According to Marshall, Timothy and Titus are only the purported, but not the real, recipients of the Pastoral epistles, which were rather addressed to leaders of congregations in Ephesus/Asia Minor and Crete respectively.¹⁰ Moreover, Marshall thinks that 2 Timothy is substantially the work of Paul and formed the basis for the “allonymous” writing of 1 Timothy and Titus.¹¹ This turns the traditional—and canonical—sequence on its head, since it would make 2 Timothy—not 1 Timothy or Titus—the first of the Pastoral Epistles to be written.¹²

⁵ For a forceful argument against this contention, see E. Earle Ellis, “Pseudonymity and Canonicity of New Testament Documents,” *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Page (Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 87; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 212–224.

⁶ For a thorough discussion of these issues, see esp. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 607–649, 1011–1028.

⁷ Marshall, 79. See Marshall’s entire discussion on pp. 57–92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 80–83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹² As I note in my review (p. 551), this involves an internal contradiction in Marshall’s argument, since he elsewhere seems to contend that Titus was written prior to the epistles to Timothy owing to the less-developed and complex ecclesiastical situation reflected in Titus. In keeping with this view, Marshall treats the Pastorals in the

However, if one applies Marshall's line of reasoning to his own commentary (which Marshall acknowledges to have been written "in collaboration with" Philip Towner), perhaps several hundred years from now some might claim that the commentary was actually not written by Marshall himself but compiled subsequent to his death by Towner based on Marshall's notes and perhaps also on some of his previous publications (not to mention oral interchanges and conversations or informal notes, such as e-mail messages, etc., during Marshall's lifetime). With the passing of time, doubtless a plausible case could be construed along those lines. While plausible, however, such a theory would obviously not square with the facts, since Howard Marshall is demonstrably still alive and did publish his commentary during his lifetime and as the person responsible for his work (the degree of collaboration by Towner is another issue). Marshall therefore rightfully would protest any such attribution of his own work to a posthumous student collaborator. One wonders whether Marshall's crediting of the authorship of the Pastorals to an "allonymous" writer similarly gives short shrift to the apostle and his role in writing these epistles.

What, then, is the evidence set forth for the pseudonymity of the Pastorals, and how are we to assess it?¹³ Attention has frequently been drawn to the *differences in style and vocabulary* between the Pastorals and the undisputed Pauline Epistles.¹⁴ The Pastorals feature words not used elsewhere in Paul, such as "godliness" (*eusebeia*), "self-controlled" (*sōphrōn*), or *epiphaneia* rather than *parousia* to refer to Christ's return (but see 2 Thess 2:8). At the same time, characteristic Pauline terminology is omitted: "freedom" (*eleutheria*), "flesh" (vs. Spirit; *sarx*), "cross" (*stauros*), and "righteousness of God" (*dikaiosynē theou*). As scholars have increasingly recognized, however, conclusions regarding authorship based on stylistic differences are highly precarious, not the least because the sample size of the writings in question is too small for definitive conclusions on the basis of word statistics alone.¹⁵ Moreover, the difference between public letters sent to congregations (the ten letters commonly attributed to Paul by conservative evangelical scholars) and personal correspondence such as the Pastoral Epistles must be taken

order Titus—1 Timothy—2 Timothy (not 2 Timothy—1 Timothy, another apparently self-contradiction). The following scenario and critique are likewise taken from my review.

¹³ The discussion below anticipates the treatment of this issue in my forthcoming New Expositor's Bible Commentary contribution.

¹⁴ See Mounce, xcix–cxviii. Other common objections to the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals are the difficulty to harmonize Paul's movements mentioned in the Pastorals with those recorded in Acts and the alleged late church structures reflected in the Pastorals (see discussion below). The following material anticipates the discussion in my forthcoming NEBC contribution.

into account.¹⁶ The fact that Paul, in the case of the Pastorals, sensed that he was nearing the end of his life and that there was an urgent need to ensure the preservation of sound doctrine for the post-apostolic period would appear to account adequately for the Pastorals' emphasis on qualifications for leadership, church organization, and the faithful passing on of apostolic tradition.

But what about the claim that pseudonymous writing was a common and commonly accepted ancient literary device? A careful screening of the relevant evidence yields the conclusion that while pseudonymity was not uncommon for apocalyptic writings, gospels, or even acts, pseudonymous *letters* were exceedingly rare:¹⁷

1. Of the two extant *Jewish* sources, the “*Epistle*” of *Jeremy* and the “*Letter*” of *Aristeas* are really misnomers, for neither can properly be classified as epistle: the former is a homily, the latter an account of the circumstances of the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek.¹⁸
2. In the apostolic era, far from an *acceptance* of pseudonymous epistles, there was actually considerable *concern* that letters be forged; thus Paul referred to the “distinguishing mark” in all his letters (Gal 6:11; 2 Thess 3:17; 1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18; Phlm 19) and makes perturbed reference to the circulation of “a letter as if from us” (2 Thess 2:2);
3. In the second century, (a) Tertullian reports that an Asian presbyter was removed from office for forging a letter in Paul’s name (*On Baptism* 17); (b) both *3 Corinthians* and the *Epistle to the Laodiceans* are transparent attempts, in customary apocryphal fashion, to fill in a perceived gap in canonical revelation (cf. 1 Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 2:4; 7:8; Col 4:16);¹⁹ and

¹⁵ For an incisive treatment, see Bruce M. Metzger, “A Reconsideration of Certain Arguments Against the Pauline Authorship of the Pastoral Epistles,” *Expository Times* 70 (1958–59) 91–94 (see esp. the four questions listed on p. 93).

¹⁶ See esp. Michael P. Prior, *Paul the Letter-Writer and the Second Letter to Timothy* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 23; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), and Philip H. Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus* (IVP New Testament Commentary; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 34–35.

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham, “Pseudo-Apostolic Letters,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988) 487 observes the rarity of apocryphal or pseudepigraphal apostolic letters in relation to other genres and conjectures that the reason for this “may well have been the sheer difficulty of using a pseudepigraphal letter to perform the same functions as an authentic letter.” He concludes that “among the letters surveyed there is no really good example of a pseudepigraphal letter that achieves didactic relevance by the generality of its contents.”

(3) the end-of-second-century bishop of Antioch, Serapion (d. AD 211), sharply distinguished between apostolic writings and those that “falsely bear their names” (*pseudepigrapha*; cited in Eusebius, *H. E.* 6.12.3).

On the basis of this evidence it seems doubtful that the early church would have been prepared to knowingly accept pseudonymous letters into the Christian canon.²⁰

Another common argument presented in favor of the pseudonymity of the Pastorals is that the *church structure* found in these letters reflects, not the first-, but the second-century church. This pattern can most clearly be seen in Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 35–107), who advocated a monarchical episcopate and a three-tiered ecclesiastical hierarchy (e.g., *Eph.* 2.2; *Magn.* 3.1; *Trall.* 2.2; 3.1).²¹ However, it can be shown that in the Pastorals the terms “overseer” (*episkopos*) and “elder” (*presbyteros*) refer to one and the same office (Titus 1:5, 7; cf. Acts 20:17, 28), so that they attest to a two- rather three-tiered structure.²²

As far as an interest in proper congregational leadership is concerned, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they established already prior to AD 50 (Acts 14:23; cf. Acts 11:30; 15:2; 20:28–31; 21:18), so that there is nothing novel about Paul’s instruction to Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Another of Paul’s letters is addressed to the “overseers and deacons” at Philippi (Phil 1:1), which coheres with the two-tiered structure presupposed in the Pastorals (e.g., 1 Timothy 3). The emphasis on qualifications for overseers and deacons in the Pastorals also supports a first-century date, because a second-century writer would have expected

¹⁸ Bauckham considers it “misclassified” and a “dedicated treatise” (478). Bauckham also discusses several didactic letters (1 Enoch 92–105; Epistle of Jeremiah; 1 Baruch; 2 Bar. 78–87).

¹⁹ Bauckham calls *Laodiceans* “a remarkably incompetent attempt to fill the gap . . . nothing but a patchwork of Pauline sentences and phrases from other letters, mainly Philippians” (485). *3 Corinthians* is part of the late second-century *Acts of Paul*.

²⁰ This is true despite Bruce Metzger’s conclusion that “since the use of the literary form of pseudepigraphy need not be regarded as necessarily involving fraudulent intent, it cannot be argued that the character of inspiration excludes the possibility of pseudepigraphy among the canonical writings” (“Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 [1972] 22). See now esp. Jeremy Duff, “A Reconsideration of Pseudepigraphy in Early Christianity” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1998), who concludes that the value of a text was closely linked to its true authorship; that pseudonymity was generally viewed as a deceitful practice; and that texts thought to be pseudonymous were marginalized.

²¹ See Mounce, lxxxvi–lxxxviii, 186–192, who cites Polycarp, Clement, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus as referring to a two-tiered structure, using *episkopos* and *presbyteros* interchangeably.

²² Frances M. Young, “On *Episkopos* and *Presbyteros*,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994) 142–148 ventures the “admittedly tentative” hypothesis that the origins of the *episkopos* and the *presbyteroi* are distinct.

his readers already to know this information.²³

An important issue that is often not given adequate weight in the discussion is the significant number of *historical particularities* featured in the Pastorals. While it is just possible that a later imitator of Paul fabricated these pieces of information to lend greater verisimilitude to his epistle, it seems much more credible to see these references as authentic instances in Paul's life and ministry.²⁴ Why would a later pseudonymous writer go through the trouble of inventing numerous details such as the following for no other reason than to add verisimilitude to his writing?

Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. . . .

Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus. Do your best to get here before winter. Eubulus greets you, and so do Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers and sisters. (2 Tim 4:9–21)

Within the framework of a theory of pseudonymity, all of the above details would of necessity need to be fictional. I am not aware of any extant instance of this kind of "fictive epistolary" genre

However, Young's interpretation of the Pastorals in light of Ignatius (rather than vice versa) seems precarious (if not methodologically fallacious).

²³ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 364.

²⁴ Contra Bauckham who believes that the author of the Pastorals "has thought himself into situations in Paul's ministry and . . . has filled out whatever historical information was available to him with historical fiction" (492; echoing Holtzmann). Bauckham even ventures the conjecture that Timothy might have written the Pastorals himself (494)! Also contra the "mediating position" of James D. G. Dunn, *The Living Word* (London: SCM, 1987) 82, who believes that Paul is "the fountainhead of the Pastorals tradition" and that the Pastorals re-express for a later

in the first or second century A.D. Moreover, an entirely different kind of hermeneutic would be required to decode this epistle. All incidental details would need to be discarded, and only the didactic portions, once separated from the non-didactic ones, would be exegetically significant. In light of the virtual impossibility of separating between the incidental and the didactic and of the negative ethical implications of a procedure which involves the invention of large sections of an epistolary writing, one may be forgiven for concluding that the theory of the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals is considerably more plausible than pseudonymous (or allonymous) alternatives. For this reason Carson, Moo, and Morris are surely right in their judgment that “[t]he Pastorals are much more akin to the accepted letters of Paul than they are to the known pseudonymous documents that circulated in the early church.”²⁵

In fact, the above-mentioned factors receive additional weight through the recent survey of the relevant ancient evidence conducted by Terry Wilder, who arrives at the following three conclusions:

1. The early church used both the authorship and the content of a given writing as criteria for authenticity, hence it would not knowingly have allowed pseudoapostolic works to be read publicly in the churches alongside apostolic ones.
2. There is no evidence for pseudonymity as a convention among orthodox Christians; and
3. The early church did not regard with indifference the fictive use of an apostle’s name.²⁶

As Wilder notes, both the external and the internal evidence clearly favor the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals. Many of the Fathers—Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian,

situation “the voice of the Pauline tradition for a new day”; and Norbert Brox, “Zu den persönlichen Notizen der Pastoralbriefe,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 13 (1969) 76–94, who considers the personal references to represent “typical situations in the ecclesiastical office, which are historicized and attributed to Paul.”

²⁵ Carson, Moo, and Morris, 363. Similarly, Donald Guthrie, “The Development of the Idea of Canonical Pseudepigrapha in New Testament Criticism,” *Vox Evangelica* 1 (1962) 43–59. This, of course, in no way precludes the possibility that Paul may have employed an amanuensis, as he frequently did in other instances. See Richard N. Longenecker, “Ancient Amanuenses and the Pauline Epistles,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 281–297; E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/42; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991); and Ellis, “Pastoral Letters,” 663–664.

²⁶ Wilder, 307. Wilder provides a very thorough review of biblical scholarship on the issue of pseudonymity,

Irenaeus, Eusebius, and the Muratorian Canon—accepted Pauline authorship, and arguments against the Pauline authorship from the internal evidence consistently fail to convince.²⁷ We conclude, therefore, that all the above-mentioned factors from a consideration of the internal evidence, together with the problems created by postulating pseudonymity (such as the above-noted lack of relevant evidence and the ethical difficulties involved in affirming pseudonymity for a New Testament writing) continue to constitute a powerful firewall against any theories denying the apostolic, Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, including Marshall’s novel view of “alonymity” or “allepigraphy.”²⁸

Genre and the Role of Background

If Paul wrote the Pastorals, what kinds of letters did he write, and what is their relevance today? The Pastorals’ genre and the role of background in interpreting specific passages are two other critical broader issues. At the outset it is worth noting that while the common label for these letters is “Pastoral Epistle,” the role of Timothy and Titus was not actually that of permanent, resident pastor of a church. Rather, these two men served as Paul’s apostolic delegates who were temporarily assigned to their present location in order to deal with particular problems. For this reason the Pastorals are not so much advice to younger ministers or generic manuals of church order as they are Paul’s instruction to his special delegates, set toward the closing of the apostolic era at a time when the aging apostle would have felt a keen responsibility to ensure the orderly transition from the apostolic to the post-apostolic period.

To what extent, then, does the Pastorals’ occasionality require an *ad hoc* hermeneutic that methodically limits their scope of reference to the original situation at hand? The just-mentioned approach is that taken by Gordon Fee, who views all of 1 Timothy, for example, as narrowly constrained by the injunction in 1:3, claiming that “[t]he whole of 1 Timothy . . . is dominated by this singular concern” and that “the whole of chs. 2–3 is best understood as instruction vis-à-vis the behavior and attitudes of the FT [false teachers].”²⁹

including the above-mentioned contribution of Marshall. Wilder’s primary problem with Marshall’s theory is the difficulty of determining which parts of the Pastorals rely on authentic Pauline material and which ones do not on the basis of the existing form of these epistles (319).

²⁷ See *ibid.*, 324–327.

²⁸ The viability of the apostolic authorship of the Pastorals is underscored by William Mounce’s advocacy of this view in his Word Biblical Commentary contribution. But see Quinn and Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, who contend in the introduction to their work that the Pastorals were written, not by Paul, but in the post-Pauline period (AD 70–100) in order to counter the tendency of disparaging the apostle owing to his shameful end as a purported criminal (p. 20). Regarding the recipients of the Pastorals, Quinn and Wacker conjecture that “not only Titus and Timothy but also the places to which the letters are addressed may have a typical or representative function” (22). Like Marshall, Quinn and Wacker believe that Titus was the first of the Pastorals to be written.

William Mounce, too, consistently interprets virtually every detail in the Pastorals narrowly in light of Paul's original context. Thus 1 Timothy 3 is viewed in light of a "leadership crisis" in the Ephesian church, in the conviction that "[a]lmost every quality Paul specifies here has its negative counterpart in the Ephesian opponents."³⁰

However, Fee's contention that the entire epistle constitutes an *ad hoc* argument narrowly constrained by the situation at Ephesus arguably represents an unduly sharp reaction against the traditional "church manual" approach that views the letter as containing timeless instructions for church leadership. Two main lines of critique may be raised. First, Fee unduly diminishes the structural markers in 1 Timothy 2:1 and 3:15–16 that set off chapters 2–3 from chapters 4ff. respectively. As especially 3:15 makes clear (cf. 2:8), Paul's injunctions in chapters 2–3 are not confined to the Ephesian situation but stipulate "how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household" in general.

What is more, the solemn descriptive terms for the church in 3:15, "the church of the living God, the pillar and the foundation of the truth," militate against the suggestion that these instructions are of value merely for first-century Ephesus. In a fairly extensive interaction with a proponent of a culturally relative approach to the interpretation of the Pastoral Epistles I have dealt with several specific passages in Paul's first letter to Timothy that are claimed to have been limited to their original context.³¹ This proponent had adduced several examples in order to show that 1 Timothy ought to be interpreted in culturally relative terms:

1. Paul's injunctions on the care of widows in 1 Timothy 5:3–16: since in our culture widows are "not necessarily destitute, or in need of male protection," this passage does not apply today.
2. Men today do not pray "with lifted hands" (1 Tim 2:8), and women do not "literally obey" Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2:9–10; hence 1 Timothy 2:12 should likewise not be considered normative.
3. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul "insists" that overseers and deacons be married, while today unmarried men are ordained; hence, again, 1 Timothy 3 does not apply.

²⁹ Gordon Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 (1985) 142–143.

³⁰ Mounce, 153.

³¹ See my response to Kevin Giles, "A Critique of the 'Novel' Contemporary Interpretation of 1 Timothy

4. While Paul in 1 Timothy 5:17 urges that church leaders be treated with “double honor,” “church teachers are not necessarily paid double to other ministers” today; this passage, too, no longer applies.
5. Slavery, “endorsed” in 1 Timothy 6:1–2, has clearly been found unacceptable by subsequent history; hence this passage is outdated as well.

As I have sought to demonstrate, however, apart from faulty or doubtful exegesis, the difficulty with such proposals is their failure to distinguish between general norms and specific applications. In the case of widows, for example, the general norm is that the church care for widows who have no other means of support. This applies in Paul’s day as well as in ours. In Paul’s day, the specific application was for widows over sixty years of age to be put on a list. While the church’s outworking of the general scriptural norm may be different today, the norm still applies. The other points listed above likewise can be answered by a consistent application of this general norm/specific application distinction.³²

A second problem with an *ad hoc* approach to the interpretation of the Pastoral Epistles is the manifest implausibility of an extreme application of this mirror-reading hermeneutic to every single injunction contained in the Pastorals. To be consistent, the proponents of such an approach would seem to have to argue that the false teachers taught all of the following (and were in every instance corrected by Paul):

1. The church ought not to pray for those in authority.
2. God wants only some people to be saved.
3. Church leaders ought not to be above reproach, or at least the false teachers were not.
4. They ought not to be faithful to their wives, or at least the false teachers were not.
5. They ought not to be hospitable or be able to teach, or at least the false teachers were not.
6. They ought to be given to drunkenness, or at least the false teachers were.
7. They ought to be violent and quarrelsome, or at least the false teachers were.
8. They ought to be lovers of money, or at least the false teachers were; etc.

2:9–15 Given in the Book, *Women in the Church*. Parts I and II,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 72 (2000) 151–167, 195–215, in *Evangelical Quarterly* 73 (2001) 205–224, esp. 207–212.

³² See also T. David Gordon, “A Certain Kind of Letter: The Genre of 1 Timothy,” in *Women in the Church: A*

Perhaps some of the above may be true, but *all* of the above? Were the false teachers really not able to teach but overseers in Paul's churches should be so able? Is Paul's point really the false teachers' lack of hospitality, which he seeks to offset with his injunction that overseers in his churches must open their homes to others? Hermeneutical consistency on the part of those advocating an *ad hoc* hermeneutic would seem to require this (or else require an inevitably arbitrary adjudication of which of Paul's statements are or are not constrained by the false teachers), but, as shown, this approach leads to rather extreme results. In the end, it seems, this kind of hermeneutic denies Paul, the author, his right (or claims the apostle is unable) to make any pronouncements in a Pastoral or any other epistle that transcend his own immediate circumstances. Clearly, however, this approach is not logically compelling. The presence of an injunction to hospitality does not require the absence of this trait in the current leadership or false teaching regarding the need for hospitality on the part of church leaders. Hence a warrant for this type of an *ad hoc*, mirror-reading hermeneutic is ultimately lacking. At the very least, one ought not to make one's conjectured reconstruction of the Ephesian context the paradigm or absolute premise on the basis of which abiding implications for the church today are precluded (or rendered presumptively unlikely from the very outset).

Especially in conjunction with the above-mentioned structural markers of 1 Timothy 2:1 and 3:15–16, it seems to be at least equally plausible that the reference to the false teachers in 1:3 informs Paul's comments in the remainder of chapter 1 and then again in chapters 4–6 but that 2:1–3:16 are more positive in orientation. Perhaps Johnson's recent proposal of a setting is helpful here where Timothy, at that time stationed in Ephesus, needed support and counsel on how to deal with the false teachers in the Ephesian church, which led Paul to interweave personal instructions with those on community life. Johnson calls this the *mandata principis* ("commandments of the ruler") letter and cites several possible ancient parallels.³³

Exegetical Challenges

If Paul is the author of the Pastoral Epistles, and if his letters transcend mere *ad hoc* argumentation and deal with important issues of perennial importance for the church in a way that has continuing relevance and authority, what are some of the major apostolic teachings pertaining to the church in this corpus of the New Testament? Quite clearly, Paul's pronouncements regarding church government and qualifications for church leaders must be at the top of the list. An adjudication of Paul's teaching on these issues in the Pastorals is needed all the more as the relevant passages present several major exegetical challenges, which is part of the reason why

Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 53–63.

issues related to church government continue to be hotly debated and disputed today.

Elders/Overseers

The area of church leadership is one area where the Pastorals quite clearly set forth paradigms for the church that reach beyond their original Ephesian or Cretan context. As mentioned, it has been claimed by some that the church structure found in the Pastorals reflects the second-century pattern of a three-tiered ecclesiastical hierarchy involving a monarchical episcopate (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch). Yet closer scrutiny reveals that the Pastorals do not in fact conform to this model but rather display a synonymous usage of the terms “overseer” (*episkopos*) and “elder” (*presbyteros*) as referring to one and the same office (Titus 1:5, 7; cf. Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Clem. 44:1, 5; cf. Jerome, *Letter* 59).³⁴

With regard to specific terminology, 1 Timothy 3:1 uses the word *episkopē* (cf. Acts 1:20), denoting the “office of overseer” (cf. Luke 19:44; Acts 1:20; 1 Pet 2:12), while in 3:2 *episkopos* is found, referring to the person holding such an office.³⁵ In the LXX the term designates one in charge of an operation (Num 4:16); in Josephus it denotes an “overseer” (Antiq. 10.53; 12.254). The Qumran equivalent was the *mebaqqer* (1QS 6:12, 20; CD 9:18–19, 22; 13:6–7). Generally, *presbyteros* is Jewish in origin, signifying seniority, while *episkopos* is Greek, indicating a person’s superintending role. Presumably overseers constituted the “board of elders” (*presbyterion*) mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:14.³⁶

The overseer (equivalent to pastor/elder) bears ultimate responsibility for the church before God (see 1 Tim 3:15; 5:17). According to the instructions on the role of women in the previous chapter (esp. 2:12), only men are eligible for this office. This is confirmed by the qualification *mias gynaikos andra* in 1 Timothy 3:2. The requirement of being, literally, an “of-one-wife-husband” may be patterned after the Roman concept of a *univira* (i.e., a “one husband”-type of wife).³⁷ This term denoting marital fidelity was initially applied to living women in relation to their

³³ See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul’s Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (The New Testament in Context; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996) 106–107, 168.

³⁴ See the discussion under Authorship above.

³⁵ See Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet 2:25. For *presbyteros*, see esp. 1 Tim 5:1, 17, 19; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1, 5; James 5:14; and the book of Acts.

³⁶ Johnson, 145.

husbands and later became an epithet given by husbands to their deceased wives (as is attested by numerous extant tombstone inscriptions).³⁸

The NIV rendering “husband of *but* one wife” (but note the commendable change in the TNIV to “faithful to his wife”) suggests that this requirement is aimed at excluding polygamists.³⁹ However, polygamy was not widely practiced in the Graeco-Roman world of the time.⁴⁰ S. M. Baugh has recently made a convincing case for interpreting the phrase as barring men who have one or several concubines.⁴¹ This widespread practice conflicted with biblical morals, since sexual union with a concubine constituted adultery and amounted to polygamy. Moreover, the word “but” is not in the original, and “husband of one wife” most likely represents an idiom that is best rendered “faithful husband.”⁴²

This is further suggested by the parallel in 1 Timothy 5:9, where a widow eligible for church support is required to have been “faithful to her husband” (so even the NIV = TNIV) and where the equivalent phrase “wife of one husband” is used (cf. 1 Cor 7:2–5). In the latter instance, the phrase cannot indicate a prohibition of polyandry (being married to more than one husband at a time) since it is made of a woman bereft of her husband. Moreover, it is excluded that Paul first encourages younger widows to get remarried and then disqualifies them later on on the grounds that they have (literally) been wives of more than one husband.⁴³ The requirement of marital faithfulness for church leaders (including deacons, 1 Tim 3:12) is consistent with the prohibition of adultery in the Decalogue (Exod 20:14 = Deut 5:18).⁴⁴

³⁷ Cf. Marjorie Lightman and William Zeisel, “Univira: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society,” *Church History* 46 (1977) 19–32.

³⁸ As the poet Catullus (1st cent. BC) wrote, “[T]o live content with one man is for wives an honor of honors” (111). A Roman imperial inscription reads, “She lived fifty years and was satisfied with one husband” (*CIL* 6.5162). The late-first-century BC *Laudatio Turiae* records a husband saying about his wife, “Rare are marriages, so long lasting, and ended by death, not interrupted by divorce . . .”

³⁹ Cf. John Calvin, *1 & 2 Timothy & Titus* ([1556, 1549]; repr., Wheaton, IL/Nottingham: Crossway, 1998) 54.

⁴⁰ See Mounce, 171.

⁴¹ S. M. Baugh, “Titus,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 3, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 501–502.

⁴² See esp. Sidney Page, “Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993) 105–120, esp. 108–109 and 114, n. 27.

⁴³ Cf. P. Trummer, “Einehe nach den Pastoralbriefen,” *Biblica* 51 (1970) 480; apparently independently, Page,

If this interpretation is correct, divorced (and remarried) men would not necessarily be excluded from serving as overseers or deacons, especially if the divorce was biblically legitimate.⁴⁵ This would be true also if the divorce has taken place in the distant past (especially if the person was not a believer at the time) and if the man's present pattern (and proven track record) is that of marital faithfulness.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, when coupled with the requirement that an overseer be "above reproach" (which includes community reputation), it may be best not to appoint divorcees to the role of overseer, especially when qualified candidates are available that did not undergo a divorce.

Likewise, the injunction does not directly apply to unmarried aspirants (of whom a celibate life-style is required). In light of Paul's positive treatment of celibacy elsewhere it may be surmised that a man's unmarried state did not disqualify him from serving as overseer.⁴⁷ The assumption underlying the present verse that an overseer will in the norm be married flies in the face of the teaching propagated by the heretics who "forbid people to marry" (1 Tim 4:3). The present statement "does not mean that bishops had to be married; it just commends marriage as something that is not at all inconsistent with the episcopal office."⁴⁸

Deacons

The second church office addressed in 1 Timothy 3 besides that of overseer/elder is that of deacon. Structurally, the presence of *hōsautōs* in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 11 ("likewise"/"in the same way") suggests that qualifications are given for two other types of officeholders besides that of overseer (3:1–7). To put it differently, the framing device by which 3:11 is sandwiched between 3:8–10 and 3:12–13 indicates that one large category is in mind, that of deacon, with Paul first addressing qualifications for male and then female office-holders, after which he briefly returns to

112; contra Fee, "Reflections on Church Order," 150, who contends that the present passage "probably prohibits remarriage of widows/widowers."

⁴⁴ The present requirement contrasts with the gnostic extremes of asceticism and sexual licentiousness. Marital fidelity was also held in high regard in the Graeco-Roman world, so that this quality would commend a Christian office-holder to his pagan surroundings (cf. Page, 117–118).

⁴⁵ Wife's marital unfaithfulness: Matt 19:9; desertion by an unbelieving wife: 1 Cor 7:15–16; remarriage owing to death of a spouse: Rom 7:2–3. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Marriage and Family in the New Testament," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁶ Cf. Page, 109–113.

male deacons and closes with a general statement pertaining to both. As mentioned, the two-tiered structure (elder/deacon) characteristic of 1 Timothy 3 is also evident from Philippians 1:1.

When comparing the qualifications for deacons with those for overseers, one notes the absence of terms related to teaching or ruling (most notably—“able to teach,” 3:2; see also 3:5b). This suggests that, in keeping with the designation “deacon” (from the Greek *diakonos*, “servant”) as over against “overseer,” deacons are not part of that group that bears ultimate responsibility for the church.⁴⁹ At the same time, they, too, occupy a formal church office, for which they must meet certain requirements. While not part of the teaching/ruling body of the church, deacons nonetheless hold important leadership roles. This is most notably indicated by the similarity between the qualifications for overseers and deacons.⁵⁰ Although Paul does not spell out the precise realm of service for the office of deacon, one may surmise that this includes various kinds of practical help and administration, such as benevolence, finances, and physical maintenance.⁵¹

According to 1 Timothy 3:8, deacons (cf. Phil 1:1; not mentioned in Titus), “likewise” (cf. 2:9; 3:11; Titus 2:3, 6), are to meet certain qualifications, whereby 3:8–10 and 12 relate to male and 3:11 to female deacons. “Their wives” (NIV) translates the Greek *gynaikas* (note that “their” is not in the original; but see the change in the NIVI to “wives” and in the TNIV to “women [who are deacons]”), which can also mean “women deacons” or “deaconesses” (NIV footnote; NASB and HCSB: “women”). Both meanings, “woman” (2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14) and “wife” (3:2, 12; 5:9; cf. Titus 1:6), are found in the present epistle; context must decide.⁵² On the whole, “women deacons” is to be preferred, for the following reasons:⁵³

⁴⁷ So Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Timothy* 10.

⁴⁸ Calvin, 54.

⁴⁹ Cf. George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 167; contra Marshall, 485.

⁵⁰ Towner, 90–91.

⁵¹ Mounce contends that “Paul does not teach that the deacon is under the overseer . . . both overseer and deacon serve the church in different capacities” (207). Yet overseers are in charge of the entire congregation (e.g. 5:17), which would seem to include deacons.

⁵² A third possibility is favored by Robert M. Lewis, “The ‘Women’ of 1 Timothy 3:11,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (1979) 167–175, that of unmarried [single or widowed] female deacons’ assistants. Walter L. Liefeld, *1 & 2 Timothy/Titus* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 134, conjectures that “at first the women who served as deacons were the wives of deacons.”

1. The absence of qualifications for overseers' wives in 1 Timothy 3:1–7.
2. The phrase “in the same way” in 1 Timothy 3:11 indicating an office similar to the one previously mentioned (cf. 1 Tim 3:8).
3. The parallel sentence structure and similar characteristics in 3:8 and 11 (including the lack of an article before “women”).
4. The absence of qualifiers such as the possessive pronoun “their” in relation to *gynaikas* in the Greek.

The reason that Paul did not call these women “deaconesses” is that in his day the word *diakonos* was still used for males and females alike (plus the respective article to indicate gender); only later the term *diakonissa* was coined (*Apost. Const.* 8.19, 20, 28).⁵⁴ Phoebe is identified as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea in Romans 16:1. Paul’s mention of deaconesses coheres well with his earlier prohibition of women serving in teaching or ruling functions over men (2:12) and his lack of mention of women elders in 3:1–7. Since being a deacon does not involve teaching or ruling, women as well as men are eligible to serve in this capacity. The requirements for deaconesses are thus similar to those for male deacons.

It should be noted that in recent years the tide of opinion has significantly shifted toward the presence of women deacons in the early church. Until recently, most major translations took the reference in 1 Timothy 3:11 to be to the wives of deacons, as the following list illustrates:

KJV = NKJV: “*their* wives”

NASB: “women”

NIV: “their wives” (footnote: or “deaconesses”)

NRSV: “women” (footnote: or “their wives” or “women deacons”)

NLT: “their wives” (footnote: or “the women deacons”)

Thus until recently no major translation unequivocally affirmed in the main text that 1 Timothy

⁵³ Cf. Jennifer H. Stiefel, “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at ‘Women Likewise . . .’ [1 Tim 3.11],” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995) 442–457.

3:11 may refer to women deacons. With the recent release of the TNIV this has now changed: as mentioned, its text says “women [who are deacons].” Notably, too, the HCSB, by opting for the wording “women,” marks a cautious departure from the KJV traditional rendering of “*their* wives.”

To this turning of the tide with regard to women deacons should be added the fact that several major recent commentaries—written by complementarian scholars, no less—unanimously affirm that the reference to Phoebe as a *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 should probably be interpreted as her serving as a deaconess.⁵⁵ The implication for the church’s contemporary practice seems to be that it may be only a matter of time until more churches will allow women to serve in the role of deaconess (assuming a biblical definition of “deacon” as a non-teaching, non-ruling office).

Conclusion

It remains to briefly summarize our conclusions. With regard to authorship, we have concluded that Pauline authorship continues to be preferred over pseudonymity or allonymity. With regard to genre and the role of background, it has been argued that an *ad hoc* hermeneutic is too constraining and that an approach consistently distinguishing between general principle and specific application is to be favored. Exegetically, the Pastorals were shown to reflect a two-tiered structure of church government, with a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers in charge and with deacons (both male and female) fulfilling serving roles in the church. The “husband of one wife” requirement was shown to refer most likely to the stipulation that church leaders be faithful to their wives; if so, there would be no reason to disqualify those candidates for pastor or elder who are divorced but whose divorce is biblically legitimate and covered by one of the exceptions stipulated in New Testament teaching.

I do not claim that these conclusions are the only ones possible from the New Testament data. Nor do I claim that I am necessarily right in all of my hermeneutical and exegetical judgments. There can be little disagreement, however, that the Pastorals are one of the most important New Testament writings for the practice of the contemporary church. The church must continue to wrestle with what Scripture teaches regarding church government, church leadership, and qualifications for leadership and commit itself to abide by what it understands the Scriptures to

⁵⁴ See also the reference in Pliny the younger, who refers to two women “called deaconesses” (*ministrae*) in Bithynia under Trajan (Epist. 10.96.8; c. AD 115).

⁵⁵ See esp. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand

teach rather than personal preference or church tradition.⁵⁶ I would also urge an awareness of one's own presuppositions and a willingness to revisit (or visit for the first time) the biblical data rather than following in the paths of one's denominational forebears. It is with the commitment to *sola Scriptura*, with the scholarly spirit of *ad fontes*, and with the dictum, "In essentials, unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things, charity" that I offer this modest contribution to our study *and practice* of the Pastoral Epistles.

Rapids: Baker, 1998) 786–787 and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 913–914.

⁵⁶ See the unpublished paper by Randall L. Adkisson, "Women Serving in the Church? A biblical and historical look at women serving in the church with particular attention given to the history and interpretation of Southern Baptists."