



Biblical Models of Discipleship in the New Testament: A Lenten Study Pack for Adults

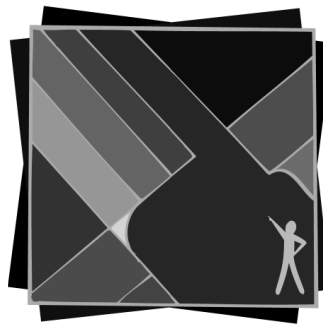
SESSION 6—SCRIPTURE: TITUS 2:11–14

Who composed 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus? How does the content and style of these writings compare to the undisputed letters of Paul? How does the writer understand discipleship as well as the role and status of women?

Introduction

One would be hard pressed to find a modern biblical scholar who would assert that Paul composed 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus—collectively known as the Pastoral Letters because the author is offering Paul’s colleagues, Timothy and Titus, advice concerning how to run their assemblies. With the exception of the Letter to Philemon, Paul did not write to individual members of an assembly, since, given Paul’s theological understanding that all members possessed the same Christ spirit, such an act would be considered divisive. Further, these letters introduce more than three hundred words not associated with the authentic, or undisputed, letters of Paul, raising the clear possibility that somebody else wrote them. Finally, with the exception of the mention of “overseers” in Philippians 1:1 (sometimes translated misleadingly as “bishop”), Paul never speaks of any hierarchy in the assemblies he established. Indeed, since he believed the end of the world was imminent and the unity of the disciples necessary, no such authoritative system would be needed. Early church scholarship suggests that the introduction of bishops, presbyters, elders—and eventually popes and patriarchs—started in the second century. Paul died at least fifty years earlier.

If these letters, which appear to be composed by a single author, were not written by Paul, why associate his name with them? Two good reasons can be put forth. By the time these letters were written, during the early



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second century, Paul had become a legend among most of the Jesus movements. Indeed, numerous copies of his letters had been circulated among the churches, even to those assemblies he did not establish. Paul’s name would give authority to a work not composed by him. A writing bearing the name “Paul” might be given careful consideration. Such a practice was common in the Greco-Roman world.

A second reason would deal with the original teachings of Paul. Obviously the end of time had not occurred. Further, the idea of the Christ spirit possessing the bodies of assembly members was being challenged by other Jesus movements who had different theological ideas. Finally, the equality among male and female disciples that Paul advocated had fallen into disfavor; some type of “corrective” needed to be established. Having the original “Paul” write like a second-century Christian theologian might indicate Paul had changed his mind, especially about the role and status of women. It is probably with

both reasons in mind that the Pastoral Letters came into existence.

How do these three letters address ideas concerning Christian discipleship? Let us turn our attention first to 1 Timothy and Titus, due to their great similarities. We then look briefly at 2 Timothy and its possible purpose and then explore some possible modern implications for the model of discipleship found within these texts.

1 Timothy and Titus: Two Peas in a Pod

First Timothy and Titus demonstrate much in common, while 2 Timothy focuses on a different set of issues and functions in a different manner. First Timothy and Titus are concerned with “false teachers,” although both texts remain vague about the nature of these new instructions. First Timothy 1:3–4 describes instructors of a “different doctrine” who “occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies.” (Also see Titus 3:9.) Scholars know that during the second century some forms of Christian Gnosticism did design complex genealogies to show how particular individuals could trace their lineage to divine beings and eventually to God. Such a family tree would suggest that one possessed a part of God that needed to be released, often through austere practices such as self-starvation and flagellation (see 1 Tim. 4:3). While a group of gnostics may be the “false teachers” referred to in 1 Timothy and Titus, not enough evidence exists to offer a definitive statement. In both texts these teachers are considered threats to the community, with Titus 1:15–16 dismissing them as corrupt and unfit.

What are the acceptable teachings? We can look at three categories: doctrines, authorities, and behaviors. The doctrines, or right teachings, are spread throughout the two works, but are easily extracted for the sake of comparing to Paul’s own understanding. The mere appearance of hierarchical authority will operate as a framework for another model of discipleship. And when the doctrine and authority issues are combined, the modifications of behaviors offered will become apparent.

The doctrines. Both 1 Timothy and Titus describe Christ Jesus as one who came into the world to save all of humanity (1 Tim. 2:5; 4:10; Titus 3:4–5), while Paul understood Christ’s salvation would first be for the Gentiles, with whom he worked. Further, the idea of eternal life through Christ apparently is a promise God made to

humanity at the beginning of time (1 Tim. 1:16–17; Titus 1:2), which seems to be missing from Paul’s works. Also notice what is missing from the texts: any description of the church as the body of Christ, a major theme of Paul’s theology. But more tangible teachings also appear in the texts.

An idea of a simple lifestyle is inherent in 1 Timothy 6:6–10 and reiterated in Titus 2:11–12. The desire for money and material goods appears to be part of the “false teachings” being circulated within the community. This pursuit is viewed by the author as detrimental to “faith,” a term in these texts that should be understood as “following the doctrine and teachings of the church.” Further, such pursuits would manifest themselves as expressions of greed and “worldly passion,” which the author considers odious among disciples.

Another key element of doctrine concerns the behaviors expected of bishops and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9). They should be men who have married only once, have children, and practice frugality, hospitality, and sobriety. These practices were not unique to Christians of the time, but considered standard social moral obligations of all persons, as will be explained later. In this manner, the moral instructions found in these texts were mainstream expressions, acceptable to Jews, Christians, and pagans alike. Perhaps one of the purposes of the works was to offer a form of Christianity that did not appear too different from other religious and ethical institutions of the time. So disciples should be good, upstanding citizens who believe in the universal salvation available through Christ, as reflected by the doctrine, or right teachings, of the church, available through the church authorities.

The authorities. Unlike Paul’s assemblies, those described in 1 Timothy and Titus possess clear hierarchical structures. Bishops were to be considered caretakers of the church (1 Tim. 3:5) and should have been in good standing with the religious community for a lengthy period of time (although no particular length is prescribed). Titus 1:9 requires a bishop to possess “a firm grasp of the word,” suggesting “right teaching,” or doctrine. In Titus’s description, it also appears as if a higher office of “elder” exists, from which the bishop is selected.

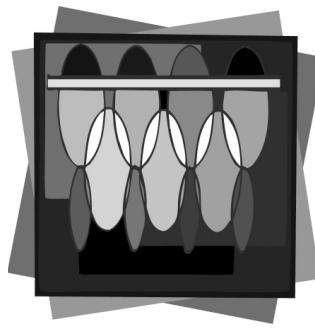
Serving under the bishop would be deacons, or servants of the church. While 1 Timothy 3:11 initially appears to allow for women to serve in this role, 1 Timothy 2:11–15 would negate this option, since a deacon would have

authority over both men and women in the church as well as need to speak when the community gathered. It is possible 1 Timothy 3:11 simply wishes to reaffirm the marital status of the male deacon and prescribe a behavior for his wife. (For further study, see the Thoughtful Christian study “Paul and the Role of Women.”)

In the communities that adhered to the teachings found in these two letters, disciples agreed to maintain the hierarchical structure and viewed it as a key element of faith. One should not be surprised that this structure reflects parts of the Roman political hierarchy, with parishioners functioning as citizens and the elders, bishops, and deacons paralleling Roman officials. As stated previously, this change would seem to make this Jesus movement more acceptable to the citizens and leaders of the Roman world due to its familiar structure. But it would be the behaviors of the *members* of the church that would make this community of disciples most like “everybody else.”

The behaviors. Women receive particular attention in both texts. First Timothy 2:8–15 makes it clear that a woman should dress modestly and be subservient to male authorities, starting with her husband, suggesting that the rationale rests with the actions of the first transgressor, Eve. Further, because, according to Genesis 2:21–23, man was created first, it is God’s intention that women be subservient (apparently Gen. 1:27, in which men and women are created simultaneously and from the same substance, should be ignored). And the notion that women will “be saved through childbearing” establishes a different (and opaque) standard for the salvation of women in this Jesus movement. Widows should become the financial responsibility of the church only if they have no family (but have given birth), are at least sixty years old, and are of irreproachable behavior; all other widows should remarry or rely on family members (1 Tim. 5:3–16). In Titus 2:3–5, we find a similar set of ideas, with the addition that they should demonstrate moderation—especially in drink—and be good managers of the household, doing what their husbands instructed them to do.

While many modern Christians might find such an understanding of women offensive, it did parallel the expectations of women in the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries: a strong *paterfamilias*, or husband, with a submissive wife who kept the children quiet and the household honorable and would only depart her spouse through death. But why did Roman society



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believe women should be considered of a lower status than men?

Simply put, the Greco-Roman world believed only one gender existed: male. Women were deformed, undeveloped men who, during gestation, grew a penis and testicles that did not properly extend. Ancient Roman gynecologists such as Galen and Soranus granted credibility to this commonly held belief through their written works, many of which have survived. So the common thought at the time was that a woman, because of her physiological nature, should be treated as inferior. In this way, the women described in the Pastoral Letters were the women of the Roman world. They could be disciples only if they kept the social mores associated with them, married, gave birth, and ran a household.

What about men? Titus 2:6–8 reflects most of the eight cornerstones of an unwritten but well-known Roman male code of conduct called the *Mos Maiorum*, or “Custom of the Fathers”: fidelity, piety, conscientiousness, discipline, firmness, frugality, authority, and morality. Men of the church were to demonstrate the ideal “maleness” expected of all Roman males. These same qualities are attributed to good elders, bishops, and deacons. So being a disciple of Christ, according to the Pastoral Letters, involved men behaving as “real” men and submitting to those persons who held authority over them. In many ways, 2 Timothy, which we will look at next, seeks to reinforce the ideas of the *Mos Maiorum*.

2 Timothy: Instructions from a Father to a Son

This letter’s salutation is similar to that of 1 Timothy: “Paul” speaks of Timothy as his “beloved child,” so we should not be surprised that the text takes the form of an elder father instructing his adult son. But unlike 1 Timothy and Titus, in which Paul was a free man, the apostle

is now in prison, abandoned by his friends (4:9–10, 16) and anticipating his death (4:6–8) and requesting that his “child,” Timothy, come see him as soon as possible (4:9, 21). Unlike the other two letters, which describe the presence of false teachers, 2 Timothy speaks of their arrival as a future event, offering a distasteful description of them (3:2–5) while telling Timothy to avoid them.

Paul also tells his ward to “shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace” (2:22). This passage is followed by a list of other attributes that, when analyzed collectively, resemble the cornerstones of the *Mos Maiorum*. This letter’s purpose appears to affirm the need for the leaders of the church—in this case, Timothy—to reflect the right principles of Roman manhood while teaching the correct doctrine (3:14–17). We are also told that Timothy is a third-generation Christian (1:5), which should make adhering to the right teachings easier for Timothy. This idea of multigenerational connections functioned as a principle of the ideal Roman family; once again, the author is attempting to demonstrate how the expectations of the church are like those of Roman society.

Modern Implications

The model of discipleship found in the Pastoral Letters can be summarized in the following manner: The members and leaders of the church were to behave as model Roman citizens, with women remaining subservient to their husbands and avoiding leadership roles in the congregation while men functioned as leaders at both church and home, deferring to those men who had greater authority while demonstrating the masculine traits associated with the *Mos Maiorum*. Elders, bishops, and deacons, all men, should strictly adhere to the doctrines of the church and hold the disciples accountable for doing the same. Anybody who attempted to teach a contrary set of doctrines to the disciples should be treated with great disrespect by the ecclesiastical authorities, who should admonish the false teachers and forbid them to speak. “Faith” should be understood as demonstrating adherence to the doctrines of the church through proper behaviors.

Some modern Christians might find their own understanding of discipleship parallels many aspects of this model. An ecclesiastical hierarchy certainly would be a familiar element of many denominations. Memorizing

a catechism, a prescribed list of questions and answers, and creeds would ensure believers follow the right teaching of the church. Even the idea of the subservience of women has credence among many Christians. And while the faithful might read the Bible, they understand that it should always be interpreted through the carefully crafted lens of doctrine.

But other Christians might be inclined to offer a severe set of critiques of this time-honored, Scripture-based model. First, as this study has tried to demonstrate, it is not the only model of discipleship found in the New Testament and practiced among early Christian communities or Jesus movements. Second, who is responsible for holding the church authorities accountable? In this model, this critical question remains unanswered. There appear too-numerous historical examples where the wrongdoings of church authorities have been hidden from congregations and the perpetrators not punished. Third, the exclusion of women from church leadership certainly could be seen as patriarchal, reflective of a non-inclusive community of believers. Fourth, many Christians maintain that “faith” should be defined as “the belief in something that cannot be proven.” This definition might not be considered consistent with that found in the Pastoral Letters. Fifth, cannot the Holy Spirit inform the believer of a new way to understand Scripture? For instance, we can see hundreds of examples in Protestantism when a denomination split over differing understanding of Scripture and doctrine. Finally, who should have the authority to determine what constitutes the ideal man or woman? Should a church acquiesce to a “traditional,” socially acceptable set of definitions just to gain the respect of a culture? For instance, why should a *good* Christian woman be willing to surrender her life for the sake of her children? For the thoughtful Christian, such critiques and questions deserve further investigation, as do all the biblical models of discipleship presented in this study.

For More Information

Frances Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

About the Writer

David Otto is professor of religious studies at Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana. He is a frequent speaker at conferences for the United Methodist Church and other denominations.