

THE PROBLEM OF THE PASTORALS

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. Historical Problem

Those who reject the Pauline authorship of the pastoral epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus) contend that *there is no time in Paul's life as recorded in Acts when he could have written these epistles.*

We cannot show, however, that the end of The Acts account is also the end of Paul's life. Arguments for a release from Paul's Roman imprisonment in the closing chapter of Acts are as follows:

A. The epistles, written from a lengthy imprisonment, expect Paul's release: the ending of Philemon as well as Philippians 2:19-24; hence, liberal scholars are interested in getting Paul away from Rome in writing the "prison epistles" (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon)

B. The ending of the Book of Acts ("two whole years") is the extent of waiting without accusers appearing. That fact explains why Paul could be imprisoned that long and yet expect release. Roman law imprisoned for awaiting trial or sentencing. Imprisonment itself was not a punishment.

C. The tradition that Paul went to Spain (not whether he actually went there) militates against his death at the end of the Acts account. Clement of Rome (A.D. 96) says that Paul went to "the bounds of the west." The Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170-180) is the earliest source indicating that Paul was released at the end of Acts.

D. Eusebius dates Paul's death in July of 67. So according to him, Paul had 62/64-67 for activity.

E. The strong tradition that Paul did write the pastoral epistles implies that early Christians believed he was released from the Roman imprisonment.

F. The imprisonment and imminent death of Paul pictured in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 speaks differently from the imprisonment at the close of Acts and the one presupposed in the prison epistles. In 2 Timothy, accusers were at Paul's trial; here no accusers appear.

II. Theological Objections

A. *The pastorals have a moral tone rather than an evangelistic one.*

The tone of a letter cannot determine authorship. The circumstances and purpose of an epistle are responsible for these matters. In other letters, Paul mixes comments about Christian living with doctrine and outreach—a natural combination for the Christian faith in the real world.

B. Faith (*πίστις, pistis*) is used as a deposit of doctrine (1 Timothy 4:1, 6).

But there is a similar usage in Jude 3. *Faith* can serve as a label for the Christian system, which is based on faith/trust. It is an example of metonymy (part put for whole). It is

not quite accurate to say that it means a deposit of doctrine if it serves metonymically for the Christian system.

C. The objections against Pauline authorship on *the absence of characteristic Pauline subject matter (fatherhood of God, work of the Holy Spirit, mystic union with Christ)* lacks force. Paul's intent in these epistles is different and presumably so in that, having never written about such matters, he would want to write for posterity because of his imminent death (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

III. Ecclesiastical Problem

Ecclesiastical arrangements are too advanced for Paul's time.

A. *Paul did not favor organizing the church.*

On the contrary, Paul had seen that there were those who could rule in Ephesus. Philippians 1:1 speaks of the same organizational pattern. From earliest times, the churches had elders: Jerusalem, Antioch ("teachers"; Acts 13:1ff). The simplicity of the church's organization may appear to be non-existent organization compared to later developments in organization, but local autonomy, for example, leaves personal connection with believers at large. The interpersonal character of the Christian faith, in fact, predicts modest organizational structure.

B. *Elders in the pastorals are essentially tradition bearers.*

However, the matter of their authority is also considered.

C. *A situation of lengthy establishment may be reflected in the injunction not to appoint a new convert.*

But the Ephesian church had existed for more than fifteen years. "New" is relative. Besides, there would be ongoing conversions that would bring new converts into the church.

D. *The directive to Titus to appoint elders in every church (1:5) is taken to represent the monarchical episcopate of the second century.*

This supposes that "appoint" signifies putting into office without selection by the congregation. Acts 6:1-6 shows that selection and appointment could be alternatives. It also forgets that Titus is serving as an extension of Paul's own apostolic work. Titus and Timothy are precisely not doing this work as an expression of whatever office they themselves we can say they have.

E. *The use of bishop and elder is supposed to represent a later distinction.*

In the text here no distinction is evident. Titus 1:5-10 shows that *elder* and *bishop* are interchangeable terms. Acts 20:17 + 28 illustrates the same interchange of terms, and Acts is surely not a mid-second-century work.

IV. Literary Objections

The words of Paul not found elsewhere in the New Testament bear a close association to the second-century fathers.

A. Ninety percent of the *hapax legomena* (ἄπαξ λεγόμενα, “once-spoken”/“one-use” words) of the pastorals can be explained as (1) words in the LXX, (2) compounds of common words, (3) words that appear in lists.

B. Other differences

1. Perhaps the second-century Church fathers used these words because they were used in the pastorals.
2. Differences in purpose, subject matter, destination, type of writing also have a bearing on the vocabulary.
3. There is more material in the Church Fathers than in the rest of the New Testament; so the greater likelihood that *hapaxes* in the pastorals would show up there.
4. The second-century vocabulary is closer to 1 Corinthians than to the pastorals.
5. Making vocabulary arguments against authorship requires a substantial body of literature—10,000 words, for example. The pastorals as a set have only about 3325 words.
6. The “higher” number of words per page raises the number of *hapaxes* per page. The pastorals have more words per page than do some of Paul’s other letters. When the “percentage” of *hapaxes* per page is taken, it is not much different from Paul’s other writings.