

1 & 2 TIMOTHY
AND
TITUS

BELIEF

*A Theological Commentary
on the Bible*

GENERAL EDITORS

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William C. Placher[†]*

1 & 2 TIMOTHY
AND
TITUS

THOMAS G. LONG

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396.

Or contact us online at www.wjkbooks.com.

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Book design by Drew Stevens

Cover design by Lisa Buckley

Cover illustration: © David Chapman / Design Pics / Corbis

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Long, Thomas G., 1946- , author.

1 & 2 Timothy and Titus : a theological commentary on the Bible / Thomas G. Long.

-- First edition.

pages cm -- (Belief: a theological commentary on the Bible)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-664-23262-7 (hardback) -- ISBN 978-0-664-26205-1 (pbk.) 1. Bible.

Timothy--Commentaries. 2. Bible. Titus--Commentaries. I. Title.

BS2735.53.L66 2016

227:8307--dc23

2015031928

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*For George Leitz, who was my mentor in
ministry far more than he ever knew.*

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Publisher's Note

William C. Placher worked with Amy Plantinga Pauw as a general editor for this series until his untimely death in November 2008. Bill brought great energy and vision to the series, and was instrumental in defining and articulating its distinctive approach and in securing theologians to write for it. Bill's own commentary for the series was the last thing he wrote, and Westminster John Knox Press dedicates the entire series to his memory with affection and gratitude.

William C. Placher, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in Humanities at Wabash College, spent thirty-four years as one of Wabash College's most popular teachers. A summa cum laude graduate of Wabash in 1970, he earned his master's degree in philosophy in 1974 and his PhD in 1975, both from Yale University. In 2002 the American Academy of Religion honored him with the Excellence in Teaching Award. Placher was also the author of thirteen books, including *A History of Christian Theology*, *The Triune God*, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, *Jesus the Savior*, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, and *Unapologetic Theology*. He also edited the volume *Essentials of Christian Theology*, which was named as one of 2004's most outstanding books by both *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* magazines.

Series Introduction

Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible is a series from Westminster John Knox Press featuring biblical commentaries written by theologians. The writers of this series share Karl Barth's concern that, insofar as their usefulness to pastors goes, most modern commentaries are "no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary." Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but such methods only begin to help theological reflection and the preaching of the Word. By themselves, they do not convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise; they do not bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship. It is to such tasks that theologians are called.

For several generations, however, professional theologians in North America and Europe have not been writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures. The specialization of professional disciplines and the expectations of theological academies about the kind of writing that theologians should do, as well as many of the directions in which contemporary theology itself has gone, have contributed to this dearth of theological commentaries. This is a relatively new phenomenon; until the last century or two, the church's great theologians also routinely saw themselves as biblical interpreters. The gap between the fields is a loss for both the church and the discipline of theology itself. By inviting forty contemporary theologians to wrestle deeply with particular texts of Scripture, the editors of this series hope not only to provide new theological resources for the church but also to encourage all

theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute, which provided funding for a consultation in June 2007. We invited theologians, pastors, and biblical scholars to join us in a conversation about what this series could contribute to the life of the church. The time was provocative and the results were rich. Much of the series' shape owes to the insights of these skilled and faithful interpreters, who sought to describe a way to write a commentary that served the theological needs of the church and its pastors with relevance, historical accuracy, and theological depth. The passion of these participants guided us in creating this series and lives on in the volumes.

As theologians, the authors will be interested much less in the matters of form, authorship, historical setting, social context, and philology—the very issues that are often of primary concern to critical biblical scholars. Instead, this series' authors will seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today, using biblical scholarship as needed for such explication but without any attempt to cover all of the topics of the usual modern biblical commentary. This thirty-six-volume series will provide passage-by-passage commentary on all the books of the Protestant biblical canon, with more extensive attention given to passages of particular theological significance.

The authors' chief dialogue will be with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture in both "high" and popular forms. Each volume will begin with a discussion of *why* the church needs this book and why we need it *now*, in order to ground all of the commentary in contemporary relevance. Throughout each volume, text boxes will highlight the voices of ancient and modern interpreters from the global communities of faith, and occasional essays will allow deeper reflection on the key theological concepts of these biblical books.

The authors of this commentary series are theologians of the church who embrace a variety of confessional and theological perspectives. The group of authors assembled for this series represents

more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender than any other commentary series. They approach the larger Christian tradition with a critical respect, seeking to reclaim its riches and at the same time to acknowledge its shortcomings. The authors also aim to make available to readers a wide range of contemporary theological voices from many parts of the world. While it does recover an older genre of writing, this series is not an attempt to retrieve some idealized past. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

William C. Placher
Amy Plantinga Pauw

Acknowledgments

Of the many colleagues and friends who gave great help in the writing of this commentary, I want to express particular gratitude to five of them: Kimberly Wagner, my tireless and most capable research assistant; New Testament scholars, friends, and conversation partners, Luke Timothy Johnson and Steven Kraftchick; my dear and patient friend of many decades, Craig Dykstra; and my pastor during my college years, George Leitz, who modeled faithful ministry for me and to whom this volume is dedicated.

Introduction:
Why the Pastoral Epistles?
Why Now?

The “Pastoral Epistles” (which is the name by which the letters 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus have collectively been called since the eighteenth century) are among the most neglected books of the New Testament. Most pastors have preached from these letters only rarely, and they are usually explored only lightly, if at all, in Bible studies. Although they present themselves as letters from the apostle Paul to two of his young pastoral protégés, Timothy and Titus (thus the name—the “Pastoral Epistles”), they were almost surely written several decades after Paul’s death, and their main focus is on establishing—or reestablishing—order, discipline, and theological soundness in congregations that have gone—or are threatening to go—off the rails.

The fact that congregations sometimes get into trouble, occasionally escalating to nasty church fights, and require remedial intervention is nothing new, of course, but it rarely makes for stirring and inspirational reading. As one accomplished preacher said of the Pastoral Epistles, “Frankly, they’re not my go-to books.” That’s understandable. We would rather read accounts of the church cruising smoothly down the highway of faith, proclaiming the gospel faithfully, compassionately showing the love of Christ, standing tall for social justice. In the Pastoral Epistles, though, we see the church on the mechanic’s lift in the garage, and we are given guidance for performing an ecclesial engine overhaul.

Ironically, though, the very traits that have caused the Pastorals to be overlooked by earlier readers may, in fact, make them urgently important for readers today. In a time when churches were full

and relatively prosperous, it was easy to imagine that healthy and confident congregations were the norm and troubled churches the exception. But in North America now the picture has drastically changed; it is the whole church that is in trouble. The membership numbers for traditional denominations are in precipitous decline, and most local congregations are becoming grayer, smaller, and sometimes discouraged. The preferred religious choice among many of our youth is “none of the above,” and churches with impressive buildings that once housed large and vibrant Sunday congregations now find only a handful gathered for worship. People look around at the vacant pews and wonder, “What happened? Where are the young people? Are we dying?”

Even congregations that have bucked the trend and seem to be growing and strong are often confused about what it means to live as Christians in the fragmented culture in which we find ourselves today. The lines marking off the difference between healthy and unhealthy congregations are often blurred: many worship spaces look and feel more like pop concert arenas and entertainment venues than sanctuaries, some churches operate more like corporate entities than pilgrim communities, people seem to know more about the lives of superficial celebrities than they do of the saints, and North American Christianity sometimes seems more beholden to consumerist values than to the gospel.

One could despair about all this church decline and wonder why God doesn’t put a stop to it. Or, more fruitfully, one could take a theological view of this shaking of the foundations. The church as we have known it is under stress, but maybe God doesn’t stop the pressure and the upheavals because God started it. As Ecclesiastes says, there is “a time to break down, and a time to build up.” We do know, at the very least, that God is in the middle of the church’s turmoil, tearing down what we have known in order to build up a church more faithful and full of life.

And that is where the Pastoral Epistles come into play. Some of the issues faced in these letters are our issues once again—the lure and peril of “spirituality” for Christians, the character of authentic worship, the qualities needed for sound leadership, the relationship between family life and the “family” of the church. And even in those

matters in these letters that seem remote from our current situation, the author approaches them with the elements we need as we address our own challenges: a love for the church, a firm gospel compass in hand, and a clear and courageous voice. As Christians in North America venture out from the ruins of the churches we once knew seeking new ways of being church, the Pastoral Epistles can refresh our memory about what really counts in Christian community and the profound importance of trustworthy leaders.

Hearing these ancient documents as wisdom for our day will require a generosity of spirit on our part. Taken at face value, the Pastoral Epistles have some jagged edges and tend to divide the house. On the positive side, these three letters, unlike other New Testament epistles, are addressed to individuals rather than churches or groups of people, and they often bear the marks of a tender and loving personal correspondence. Also, there are passages in these letters that soar in beauty and theological power, for example the moving portrait of Paul at the end of his life as one who has “fought the good fight . . . finished the race . . . kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7) or the encouragement given to Timothy as a pastor to reclaim the zeal for ministry that was there on the day of his ordination, “to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Tim. 1:6). Reverberating through these letters is a love for the gospel and for the church, which finds expression in a yearning that all of the faithful would “take hold of the life that really is life” (1 Tim. 6:19).

On the negative side, however, there is a concern for church order and decorum in these letters that many readers find brittle and stern, perhaps even repressive. Beyond this, some of the instruction given in the Pastorals is quite conventional, reflecting typical codes of behavior expected in Greco-Roman households of the era rather than a new gospel-inspired ethic. The writer of these letters seems at times to forget, or perhaps ignore, his own teaching about the transformative power of Christ. Other teaching in these letters is downright shocking, even repugnant, to readers today. For example, the author says, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man” (1 Tim. 2:12), and he advises, “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters . . .” (Titus 2:9). Also, the author sometimes does

not mind his tongue, speaking of some members of the community as “silly women” (2 Tim. 3:6) and seeming to agree with the slur that all people from the island of Crete are “liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons” (Titus 1:12).

How do we approach these letters, then, which both attract and repel at the same time? Some of the reading strategies that I have chosen to employ in this commentary are as follows:

1. To read the Pastoral Epistles in their own context, that is, in light of the circumstances, issues, and possibilities inherent in the situation being faced by the author.

In Sierra Leone in the 1950s, the noted church historian Andrew Walls began his long teaching career. Being at that time a young and aspiring professor with an Oxford and Cambridge pedigree, Walls delivered learned lectures to his African students on the documents and history of the early church. They dutifully took notes, but, as Walls says, “You could see from their faces that it didn’t penetrate.”¹

But then Walls made a startling discovery. He began to worship in local African Christian congregations, went to meetings with the Sierra Leonean pastors, and immersed himself in the life of the indigenous churches. One day in the classroom, when he was lecturing to his students about the second-century church, it suddenly struck him that he “was actually living in a second-century church.”²

After that moment of insight, Walls read the documents of the early second-century church with new eyes, aware now that he was looking at living examples of that literature all around him. He read, for example, the long sermon-like document known as 1 Clement and would recognize that he had heard similar sermons in the African context. “Yes,” he said, “I’d hear sermons like that, and just as long.” He read Ignatius on martyrdom, “and though I had not actually seen anybody going to martyrdom, you saw the same sort of

1. Tim Stafford, “Historian Ahead of His Time,” *Christianity Today*, 51/2 (February 2007): 88.

2. *Ibid.*

intensity.”³ He said to himself, “Why did I not stop pontificating and observe what was going on?”⁴

Reading the Pastoral Epistles with insight and understanding requires, I think, a similar shift in perspective. As readers, we have to imagine our way into a late first-century Christian community in Asia Minor. Reading these letters in context does not mean forgoing our own judgments about what these texts finally say to us, to our faith, and to the church in a quite different world today, but it does mean suspending that judgment long enough to try to make an empathetic connection to the author in his own time and place. We read these letters keeping in mind novelist L. P. Hartley’s famous dictum, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”⁵

I have written this commentary while serving on the faculty of a university divinity school in the United States, a school in which men and women in roughly equal numbers are preparing for positions of responsibility and religious leadership. Our faculty and students come from all over the world, represent many theological traditions, and are of many ethnicities, backgrounds, and theological worldviews. We are located in the American South, and some of our students are the descendants of nineteenth-century African slaves, while others are the great-great-grandchildren of slave owners. Some of our students are heterosexual and others are homosexual, all preparing for ministry in a time when church attitudes and rules are changing rapidly and dramatically.

In other words, I live in an environment where the church seems global, multicultural, and complex, and major change seems not only possible but inevitable and desirable. Not only that, the community in which I work is filled with people who see themselves as empowered to create that change and as called to help transform the world toward ever more just societies. We are aware of our past—its rich traditions and its shameful times and historical burdens—but we are also aware that the future can and must be different. In short, when some social structure is out of alignment with the values

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002), 17.

of the gospel, whether it be the government, the economic system, the church, or even the theological school itself, we see ourselves as having the responsibility to do all we can to change the world and make it right.

It would be easy to think that the author of the Pastoral Epistles operated in such a world as ours, but he did not. In his world, to be sure, some things could be changed, but the basic structures of society were seen as much more fixed and permanent than we view them. In our world, young people can flash messages over social media, gather a crowd in a public square, and eventually accomplish the almost unthinkable: topple a government. The author of the Pastorals, however, could not envision such a possibility. There would, for example, always be an emperor. One could imagine many ways of relating to the emperor—pray for the emperor, not pray for the emperor, pray *to* the emperor, refuse to pray to the emperor, obey the emperor, resist the emperor, die for the emperor, die at the hands of the emperor—but a world without an emperor? Unimaginable. Therefore, the author of the Pastorals, given his context, will consistently offer advice about how to move the pieces on the chessboard. We sometimes lose patience with him because we expect him to throw out the chessboard and to change the game itself.

Two experiences in particular have given additional shape to my understanding of the context of these letters. First, before I became a seminary teacher, I briefly served as the pastor of a small congregation, long enough to discover the difference between the gospel expressed in pure terms and the gospel as actually lived out in the messy lives of people and congregations. In times of calm and when I was at my pastoral best, I could speak to my congregation as a caring shepherd, with grace, patience, and compassion. But there were other times when some brush fire had broken out in the church, and, desperate to keep the fire from spreading, I could hear myself barking shrill orders like a desperate fire chief. Just so, the author of these letters is not writing as a systematic theologian. He is writing as a pastor to real congregations, congregations in trouble, and the brush fires are starting to spread. As New Testament scholar John P. Meier said, “The Pastorals are often accused of being pedestrian

and bourgeois. As every bishop knows, they are simply realistic.”⁶ Therefore, when the mood suddenly darkens in these letters and the author’s voice becomes bossy or even caustic, I don’t always respond with joy or appreciation, but as a former pastor myself, I do think I understand.

I remember some years ago seeing, on one of the network television morning news shows, an interview with a learned psychiatrist. He had just written a wise and compassionate book about his years working in a psychiatric hospital and treating patients with severe mental illness. At one point in the interview he recalled having seen, in his days as a young medical student, the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. In the film, Jack Nicholson plays the part of R. P. McMurphy, a small-time criminal who fakes insanity to get out of prison work duty. He is transferred to a psychiatric hospital, which is ruled over by the formidable, stern, and inflexible Nurse Ratched. To the delight of the movie audience, McMurphy ends up leading a spirited rebellion among the patients against her and her rigid rules. Because of the movie (and the Ken Kesey book on which it was based), the name “Nurse Ratched” is now cultural shorthand for oppressive authoritarianism.

The psychiatrist being interviewed said that when he first saw the movie that he, like almost everyone else, “hated Nurse Ratched.” She came across as mean, obstinate, and hidebound. But then the psychiatrist, somewhat tongue in cheek, quipped, “Now that I am older, however, and have spent my whole medical career dealing with severe psychiatric cases, I have a deep appreciation for her and her work!” Just so, experience in trying to lead real and challenging congregations can soften how we understand the seemingly stern author of these letters.

Second, while I have not had the extensive experience outside of North America that others, such as Andrew Walls, have had, occasional opportunities to teach and do church-related work in what are sometimes called “less-developed” parts of the globe have tuned my ear somewhat to the problems and issues in these letters. There are many churches in the world today that in important

6. John P. Meier, “The Inspiration of Scripture: But What Counts as Scripture? (2 Tim 1:1–14; 3:14–17; cf 1 Tim 5:18),” *Midstream* 38/1–2 (January–April, 1999): 76.

ways are more like the late first-century congregations of the Pastorals in form and outlook than they are like their contemporary counterparts in Chicago, Dallas, Minneapolis, or San Francisco. In these congregations, gender roles are complex but have firmer boundaries and definition than they do generally in North America, the lines between Christian and non-Christian belief and practice are more sharply drawn than many North American Christians are accustomed to drawing, and communication is carried more informally—by word-of-mouth as people travel from one small church gathering to another. When I see the author of the Pastorals getting in a knot over whispers and rumors being spread by some of the women as they move about in the community, I realize I have seen similar communication patterns—and problems—among churches today set in village societies. Gossip can be a problem in any congregation no matter where it is located. But in these congregations, gossip—regardless of the gender of its source—is not simply a nuisance; it can become the primary means of forming attitudes. Left unchecked, it can bring the church to its knees, and not in prayer. These congregations breathe much of the same air as the churches of the Pastorals, and awareness of them has helped tune me to the context of these letters.

2. To read the Pastoral Epistles as Scripture.

Reading these letters as Scripture does not mean suspending one's critical faculties. In fact, it could be argued that reading these texts as holy Scripture requires the sharpening of critical faculties. But to read these documents as Scripture does mean recognizing that the church has included them in the canon of Scripture because, through the centuries, it has heard gospel in them and found its life formed by them more fully into the pattern of Jesus Christ.

What this kind of reading involves—and this is an often difficult assignment for a person of my temperament—is openness, generosity, and humility. As biblical scholar Ellen Davis has commented about the task of reading difficult biblical texts,

The difficult text is worthy of charity from its interpreters. Interpretive charity does not mean pity but rather something more like generosity and patience toward the text. . . .

Charitable reading requires considerable effort; it is easier to dispense with the difficult text. Those who regard a text as religiously authoritative are willing to sustain that effort, because they perceive it in some sense as a gift from God.⁷

If we understand these letters, then, to be more than artifacts of second-generation Pauline ecclesiology, but to be in some sense gifts from God, then at the end of the day we may throw up our hands in despair about this or that passage, unable to see how such a word has any divine gift in it. But we will do so only at the end of the day, not at the beginning. We will sit for a long day, dwelling humbly with these texts, listening for the gift that God wishes to give through them. More practically, we will consider each passage in these letters to consist of the intersection of the gospel and some concrete circumstance in a late first-century Christian community. Sometimes we will be able to hear the gospel word clearly. Other times, though, the circumstance will shout more loudly than the gospel; so, denied a clear word, we will look instead for the trajectory of the gospel, the difference it made in the situation.

I say this because the Pastoral Epistles have more than their share of unsympathetic readers. To be sure, if one wishes to see these epistles as unfortunate examples of the ossification of the once-vibrant early church, or as documentary evidence of the resurgence of a powerful and rigid patriarchy, or as a heavy-handed imposition of conventional Greco-Roman domestic ethics on the Christian community, there is plenty of material in these letters to make a damning case. But to read the Pastoral Epistles as Scripture is to take on two roles. We do serve, temporarily, as the prosecuting attorney, putting these texts to the test. But finally we stand as the defense attorney. We expose these documents to the critical gaze. They can take it. But in the end, we come around to do what we can to advocate for them. The good interpreter of Scripture does not make a false case for the text but does work hard to make the best case for the text. As Jewish philosopher Moshe Halbertal has argued,

7. Ellen F. Davis, "Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic," in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 178. Italics in original removed.

In the case of the scriptures, there is an *a priori* interpretive commitment to show the text in the best possible light. Conversely, the loss of this sense of obligation to the text is an undeniable sign that it is no longer perceived as holy. Making use of the principle of charity, the following principle can be stipulated: the degree of canonicity of a text corresponds to the amount of charity it receives in interpretation. The more canonical a text, the more generous its treatment.⁸

Some commentators have studied the Pastoral Epistles, compared them to the more daring documents elsewhere in the New Testament, and come to the understandable conclusion that the author has an unfortunately “conservative and conventional social ethics.”⁹ Perhaps this is correct. When we read him from this distance, the author can indeed sound at times like the repressive Dean Wormer in the movie *Animal House*, especially when he is contrasted to the more radical-sounding Paul of Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28) and “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1).

But generosity demands that the author of the Pastorals receive a closer and better look, that he not be dismissed as merely a stiffer, more buttoned-up version of the “real Paul.” Maybe he is, as his critics claim, rigid—temperamentally, theologically, and socially—frightened that he is losing control. On the other hand, though, maybe we get a different picture of him once we consult the weather radar. Maybe, just maybe, he is working like mad to nail a blue tarp on the roof of the church in the middle of a thunderstorm. When the howling winds and pounding rains are threatening to destroy the house, it may not be fair to criticize him for not installing a screen porch and skylights. Perhaps he’s just a tightly wound conservative. Or maybe it’s that he believes, as the windows rattle in the gale and the shingles fly off the roof, that the church and the gospel are worth conserving.

8. Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 29.

9. Jouette M. Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 105.

3. *To read these letters not as coming from Paul the apostle but from someone writing in his name, probably near the end of the first century.*

The question of who wrote the Pastoral Epistles, once fairly settled, has opened up again in New Testament scholarship. A number of scholars have gone back to the classical view that these epistles were precisely what they present themselves to be, authentic letters from the apostle Paul to two of his protégés in ministry, Timothy and Titus (although “Titus” may be simply a nickname for Timothy).¹⁰ Most New Testament scholars, however, continue to subscribe to the dominant view, which has more or less held sway for two centuries, that these letters come from a later period, probably sometime around 90–100 CE, and that they were composed by an unknown author writing in the name of Paul.

The reasons for this prevailing view are complex, but essentially they rest on three factors: the style of the letters, the situations addressed, and what we know otherwise about the career of Paul the apostle. In short, these letters, while reminiscent of Paul, don’t ring quite true to being in his voice, the churches addressed in these letters seem more developed in governance and doctrine than early Pauline churches, and the places and occasions mentioned in these letters don’t square up neatly with what we know of Paul’s missionary itinerary. Advocates of Pauline authorship have responses to all of these factors (e.g., Paul didn’t always sound the same in his authentic letters; why should we expect consistency here?), but the weight of the evidence for these as later epistles seems overwhelming and, thus, persuasive to me.

On the other hand, I don’t see these letters as forgeries, someone’s attempt to mislead readers into thinking he’s Paul. I say more about this in the commentary on 1 Timothy 1:1–2, but I argue that these letters were written late enough that Paul is almost certainly dead (he probably died in the mid-sixties; there is an allusion to his impending death in 2 Timothy 4:6) and that Paul’s death would surely have been well known in the circle of Pauline churches. So, none of the original readers or hearers of these letters would have

10. For a fine statement of the view that these letters are from the hand of Paul the apostle, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), esp. 55–99.

been fooled into thinking these were letters from the actual Paul. What they received, instead, was a message from the iconic Paul, the Paul of blessed memory, the Paul who would have said this to us were he here to say it.

Also, if these letters were composed in the late first century, this would be about forty years after the Pauline missionary tours, and so Timothy and Titus are also probably dead, or certainly quite elderly and not the young pastors implied in these letters. I take the view that Timothy and Titus are symbols for pastoral leaders in the churches addressed by these letters. When “Paul” speaks to “Timothy” or to “Titus,” he is actually speaking to the leaders in those communities who have remained loyal, or wish to remain loyal, to the Pauline trajectory of early Christianity.

Poet Marianne Moore delightfully described the task of a true poet as creating “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”¹¹ In other words, a good poem is like an imaginary garden, but the poem should connect with actual life so firmly and palpably that the garden is filled with “real toads.” There is a sense in which the Pastoral Epistles are imaginary gardens with real toads. The act of the imagination was the creation of three Pauline-like letters; the real toads are the actual problems and circumstances of the churches that received them.

First and Second Timothy are presented as letters from Paul to Timothy in Ephesus. I take the view that the Christian house churches in Ephesus probably constitute the real destination of these two letters. The tangible problems presented so clearly and forcefully are likely the actual issues in this community. In a way, though, it matters not very much if Ephesus is a symbolic destination rather than an actual one. Maybe the crisis described in these letters was widespread enough that this letter could have been read profitably in a number of settings, but one thing is sure: the problems being addressed—the toads in the garden—are real.

Titus presents itself as a letter from Paul to Titus, whom he has left to organize the church in Crete. This letter has a somewhat less specific feel than do the first two. Some of the same issues are raised,

11. Marianne Moore, “Poetry,” in *Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 36.

but they are presented more generally and sometimes as potential rather than actual problems. It may be that the newly forming Christian community in Crete is the actual destination for this letter, or it may be that “Crete” is a symbol for any new church development in the post-Pauline world of the late first century. Again, the precise destination of these letters is an interesting question but not critical to interpretation.

One additional note about a stylistic strategy in this commentary. When I use the names Paul, Timothy, and Titus, I mean to refer to the actual Paul, Timothy, and Titus mentioned in Acts, Galatians, and elsewhere in the New Testament. When I put these names in quotation marks—e.g., “Paul”—I mean to refer to them as symbolic figures. Sometimes it is difficult to know which typography to employ, but I hope it is clear enough to help the reader know which is which.