

The Three "T"s

In coming to the New Testament books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, the three "T"s, there is a marked contrast between these and the preceding Epistles. In these Epistles the sublime discourses on the mysteries of the faith give way to detailed instructions concerning the government of the church and the Christian life. There are also marked differences in vocabulary and style of composition. These issues have led to controversy in the modern era of biblical studies over the question of authorship and intent.

In part, this is because of differences in language and style, which seem to be at variance with the evident statement of Pauline authorship, and the very personal communications between the apostle and his close fellow workers. Some make a charge of pseudonymity (Dibellius and Conzelmann, Hanson), albeit a well-intentioned one of claiming apostolic authority for the needed struggle against heretical teachers. Yet such an elaborate fabrication, even by the literary standards of the first or second centuries, is hardly reconcilable with the books' inclusion in the canon of Scripture. Countering this charge, others argue that the differences in language are not so significant when the circumstances of their writing, including how they were written, are taken into account (Kelly; cf. Towner). In terms of theological content, the predominance of ethical instruction also has been noted as being out of character with the rest of the Pauline corpus in which such instruction is incidental to proclaiming the mysteries of God and His saving plan for humankind. It has been argued that these Epistles are a second-century attempt to mold Christianity into a more culturally acceptable form. The resulting ethical code set forth is perceived as conforming to social circumstances of the time, including its strongly hierarchical bias, and thus inappropriate in today's democratic world.

Such questions have some bearing on the way in which these books should be interpreted. However, when the starting point for the interpretation of theological themes is centered primarily on authorship, style, or culture, there is a great possibility of erring in interpreting the Scriptures. This journal has argued that the key to interpreting every book of divine revelation is an understanding of the divine plan or economy, which involves the dispensing of God in His intrinsic essence into humanity for the full expression of God in humanity (see *Affirmation and Critique* IV,3,

July 1999). Every book in the canon of Scripture has the power to usher readers of every generation into this divine economy. The Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for producing God's expression in His people, an expression of divinity in humanity which surpasses, both in quality and time, any ethical code envisaged by human culture.

A full definition of God's economy is given in *Affirmation and Critique* (IV.1, January 1999). The following items serve as touchstones for interpreting these books according to God's economy. First, God in His Trinity carries out His eternal plan: God the Father purposes, God the Son accomplishes the Father's purpose, and God the Spirit applies the Son's accomplishment. Second, God's economy is accomplished by the dispensing of the Triune God. The Father is embodied in the Son, and the Son is realized as the Spirit to be imparted, that is, dispensed into redeemed humanity. Third, the issue of this dispensing is the church, the Body of Christ, which is a group of human beings who have become the corporate expression of God in both life and nature. Fourth, this involves God's complete salvation of the tripartite human being: the human spirit through regeneration, the soul through transformation, and the body through glorification. Finally, the key to the accomplishment of the divine economy in humanity is the human spirit, as distinct from the soul. This God-created human faculty, by which humanity can have fellowship with God, is mingled with the Triune God through regeneration to become one spirit with Him. Thus, it is the means for our cooperation with God in the divine economy. Let us approach these Epistles at appropriate junctures¹ and apply these touchstones.

In Faith

"Charge certain ones not to teach different things...which produce questionings rather than God's economy, which is in faith" (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Faith is a recurring theme in these books and it bears a twofold denotation. It refers to the contents of the good news announced to the world and received by those who believe. The faith includes not only items such as forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal wrath, but all the aspects of God's complete salvation in the New Testament, including God's selection in eternity past, salvation in the present, glorification at the Lord's coming, and the inheritance in eternity future. The person

of Christ and His redemptive work are its focus. This faith is common to all believers (Titus 1:4; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 3), and it is mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:19; 2:7; 3:9, 13; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10, 12, 21; 2 Timothy 3:8; 4:7; and Titus 1:1, 4, 13.

The proclamation of the gospel causes a reaction within the hearers. This is faith as a believing act, a response to hearing the items of the faith of the gospel. It causes the believers to enter into and appropriate the things which they have heard. Hence, it is the divine substantiating gift imparted into the believer through the speaking of the word of God (Heb. 11:1; Rom. 10:14). It is the faith *of* Jesus Christ, because its source is Jesus Christ, yet at the same instant it is the faith *in* Jesus Christ, because it is our act of believing in Him (3:22). This is its denotation in 1 Timothy 1:2, 5, 14, 19; 2:15; 4:12; 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:5, 13; 2:22; 3:10, 15; and Titus 2:2; 3:15.

There is a teaching which produces faith, and only this is allowed by the apostle. In these books it is called variously the healthy teaching, the teaching according to godliness, and simply *the* teaching. What distinguishes it from other teachings is neither its scriptural credentials, nor its eloquence or apparent power to move people, but simply its product: faith. The phrase *in faith* indicates both a sphere and element of faith (Lee 971). The sphere is the new creation in Christ into which believers in Christ are transferred from the realm of the old creation and the natural life. The element is the operation of faith within us, which accomplishes our regeneration as children of God (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26), our receiving of God's life (1 John 5:10-12), our partaking of His nature (2 Pet. 1:4), our being in Christ (Gal. 3:26-27) and becoming members of His Body (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 5:30), and our sharing in all that He is as the Head (3:8; 4:15-16; 3:16-19) in order to express Him in full (1:23).

In the sphere and element of faith, God accomplished His *oikonomia*, His economy or administration. Some English versions prefer to follow a textual variant here, *oikodomēn*, meaning edifying (KJV) or training (NRSV), as it is those who already believe and have received God's salvation for whom the writer is concerned. But the word *economy* is not limited to the "administration of the things by which God has provided for and prepared salvation, which salvation must be embraced by faith" (Wuest 491), the means whereby the believers are justified through faith in Christ and reconciled to God. God's economy has a much fuller scope and concerns not only the initial salvation in the divine life, but also its full development within the believer unto maturity. For this economy, the apostle was given a stewardship (also *oikonomia*) in which he struggled not only to preach the gospel (Eph. 3:2, 8) but also present every man full-grown in Christ (Col. 1:25, 28). Only *the teaching*, that is, the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42), can cause God's economy to be carried out in full

by ushering God's people into the sphere and element of faith for their participation in God's dispensing. Any other teaching, regardless of its scriptural basis or appeal, is of no value in terms of this goal and will become a distraction to the believers from the purpose of their salvation.

Coming to the Full Knowledge of the Reality

In 1 Timothy 2:4 the apostle speaks of the Savior God's desire for all people "to be saved and to come to the full knowledge of the truth." The word *truth*, which can also be rendered "reality" (Liddell and Scott), is more than simply "correct doctrine" (Towner 65). It is "the substantial elements of what we believe, as the reality of the full gospel" (Lee 1176). The latter definition is borne out in four stages of the truth which can be identified in these Epistles: the word of the truth (2 Tim. 2:15), the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:7), the truth according to godliness (Titus 1:1), and the pillar and base of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

The word of the truth may be considered the initial stage of the truth, conveyed through the preaching of the gospel (Col. 1:5). The truth is the reality of the gospel conveyed to the hearers by the spoken word through the Holy Spirit as the seal (Eph. 1:13). It is not the rationalization of the doctrine of the gospel, but the very substance of what is spoken that becomes a reality to the gospel's recipient. God Himself (cf. Rom. 1:25), Christ (John 14:6), and the Spirit (1 John 5:6) become real to the believers through the gospel because the word through the Spirit conveys their reality with all the divine and spiritual things in the Word of God into the believers (John 17:17; Eph. 4:6; 2 Cor. 13:5; Rom. 8:11). It is thus they know and subjectively experience the things spoken to them.

After hearing the word of the truth in the gospel, the believers must progress to "the full knowledge of the truth." The term *full knowledge* (*epignosis*) indicates maturity (1 Tim. 4:3; cf. Rom. 14:1-3). After believing, for example, we need to be filled with the full knowledge of His will, and our growth is by the full knowledge of God (Col. 1:9-10). The apostle Paul also struggled to present everyone full-grown in Christ, which meant coming to the full knowledge of Christ (v. 28; 2:2). These and other passages (Eph. 1:17; 4:13; 2 Pet. 1:8; Col. 3:10) all indicate that the believers' advancement to the full knowledge of the truth is not one of mental knowledge (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1; 13:2, 8), but of organic growth in the divine life, commencing with the regeneration of the human spirit and carried on by the transformation of the soul towards a full maturity in life.

Teaching New Testament doctrines is no guarantee of producing the life which manifests those doctrines even in those who heartily assent to them. History abounds with

examples of the discrepancy between knowledge and living. In declaring himself to be an apostle of the truth according to godliness (Titus 1:1), the writer's view was not one of teaching ethics. Godliness is not an outward form void of content (2 Tim. 3:5), but the third stage of the truth in these Epistles; it is the organic growth and inward transformation that expresses truth in the lives of those who experience it. Only then is the church the supporting pillar and holding base of the truth, which is the fourth stage of the truth. The truth, the reality, is preserved and upheld for humankind during an age of apostasy not by the preaching of its doctrines alone but by the working of its substantial elements into a group of human beings until they corporately become its very constitution.

The House of God

By the end of chapter three of 1 Timothy, the apostle has addressed four categories of people within the church: men and women in general (2:8-15), and overseers and deacons/deaconesses in particular (3:1-13). His concern is for the believers to know how to conduct themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God. It is evident by the immediate context (vv. 4-5, 12) that the word *house* indicates a household or family. The house of God as the family of God is prefigured by the house of Israel, God's house in the Old Testament (Lev. 22:18; cf. Heb. 3:2), but it bears a much more intimate significance in the New Testament. God's household in the New Testament speaks of a life relationship between God and His begotten children, who possess His characteristics and partake of His nature.

The title *the living God* also requires redefinition in light of the incarnation of the Word. In the Old Testament this was a title in contrast to the lifeless gods and idols of the nations (Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26). For Israel, God was living in that He acted and moved on behalf of His people. But when Peter in Matthew 16:16, uttered the revelation given to him by the Father, "You are...the Son of the living God," he was speaking of the embodiment of the living God in Christ (cf. Col. 2:9). This embodiment was enlarged after His death and resurrection in the Body of Christ, the church. In 1 Timothy 3:15 the house of God is the church of the living God because the church now embodies the living God in Christ. Moreover, the Divine Trinity is implied here. As the Son of the living God, Christ was the embodiment of the Father, and through death and resurrection He was transfigured to become the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17). The Spirit as the realization of Christ dwells in the believers, making them corporately the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16).

Inextricably tied to the notion of *house* in the Scriptures is the concept of building. We may identify the idea of building

in the immediate context of this passage, with the use of the terms *pillar* and *base*, a reference to the pillars in the portico of Solomon's temple and their building (1 Kings 7:13-22). The idea of God's building occurs throughout the New Testament (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 3:9-10; 14:12; Eph. 2:19-22; 4:12, 16; 1 Pet. 2:5), and the eventual fulfillment of God's eternal purpose, the New Jerusalem, is described in terms of a building work (Rev. 21:18). To apply the touchstone of God's economy to the building, we must inquire as to the kind of building intended. In John 14:23 Jesus said concerning the one who loves Him and keeps His word that He and the Father will come and make an abode (dwelling place) with that person. This dwelling place is the mutual abode where both the believer and Christ dwell (15:5), and is the fulfillment of the house of God spoken of in 2:16-17. This is realized by the coming of the Spirit of reality in 16:12-15. God's building is God in His Trinity progressively indwelling the believers, and the believers dwelling in God (Eph. 4:15-16), until a full expression of God in humanity is produced.

With this understanding of God's building the interjection in 1 Timothy 3:16 is more readily understood: "And confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness: / He who was manifested in the flesh." Christ, who was God incarnated in the flesh, is the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament type of the house of God (John 1:14 Gk., *eskēnoō*: to tabernacle; John 2:19-21). His living became the definition of godliness, the manifestation of God in the flesh. This living, however, now continues in the church as the enlarged house of God. Hence, in this hymn of praise in 1 Timothy 3:15, Christ and the church are identified through a significant shift in the order of events: "He who was manifested in the flesh, / Justified in the Spirit, / Seen by angels, / Preached among the nations, / Believed on in the world, / Taken up in glory."

In sequence, as applicable to Christ, the last phrase *taken up in glory*, which speaks of Christ's ascension, should follow the second phrase *justified in the Spirit*, which speaks of His baptism, death, and resurrection. Its occurrence in the last line indicates not only Christ's ascension into glory (Mark 16:19) but also the church's being received up in glory at the Lord's second coming (1 Thes. 4:16-17). What is seen by angels (1 Pet. 1:12; Heb. 12:22), preached and believed on (Eph. 3:8-11), and then taken up in glory is not the individual Christ, but a corporate Christ, the Head with His Body, the church. The living of Christ as the mystery of godliness continues in the church as His living expression.

A Good Minister of Christ

In 1 Timothy 4, against a background of the Spirit's prophetic intimation of the apostasy among the believers, Paul's concern is that his young co-worker Timothy would

be a good minister of Christ Jesus (v. 6). The genitive construction of *Christ Jesus*, qualifying the term *minister*, can refer equally to representation, that is, who the minister represents, or to substance, that is, what the minister ministers (as in ministers of sin, of condemnation, of death, of righteousness). Moreover, the word for *minister*, *diakonos*, was the usual term employed for those who waited on tables (Liddell and Scott, Bauer, et al.; cf. Acts 6:1-6). Thus, the thought here is of a dispensing service with an emphasis on what is dispensed being equally as forceful as the person through whom this dispensing service is being conducted. A good minister of Christ Jesus is someone who serves Jesus Christ to others as food. The apostle himself was such a minister, ministering the unsearchable riches of Christ to the nations (Eph. 3:7-8).

For such a ministry it is necessary for one to be nourished with the words of the faith and to exercise unto godliness (1 Tim. 4:6-7). The words of the faith are the healthy words of the apostles, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ (6:3) and the God-breathed (*theopneustos*) writings of the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:15-16). These terms confirm that the viewpoint of the writer is fully one of God's economy, in that the function of the word is not mainly one of rendering outward teaching but of conveying life and spirit (John 6:63), and that to be nourished with the words of the faith is to be inwardly supplied with the Lord who is Spirit and life (v. 54; 1 Cor. 15:45; John 14:6). The outcome of this inward nourishment is godliness, a life of divine reality which expresses its inward source (cf. John 6:57). An exercise unto godliness, therefore, involves receiving the life supply of Christ in the Word of God, not mere knowledge, in order to manifest Christ outwardly. With the supply of this inward nourishment and on the basis of such an outward expression (1 Tim. 4:12), Timothy was enabled to minister Christ as food to others for their nourishment and living.

The Person Whom God Owns as His

First Timothy 6 is principally devoted to the question of material wealth, both the possession of riches and the aspiration to possess them (vv. 17-19; 5-10). To possess riches, yet willingly and liberally share them, requires setting one's hope absolutely on God (v. 17). To be without riches, yet having the intention and aspiration of acquiring them, will cause destruction and ruin to a believer's faith. "But you," contrasts the apostle, "O man of God, flee these things" (v. 11). This title, one "of great dignity," indicates that Timothy had become God's possession "by appropriation" (Chrysostom 8, 468). This appropriation has both a judicial or legal aspect, in that through the redemption of Christ we become God's own possession (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 3:23), and an organic aspect, in that we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and thus marked out as God's inheritance (Eph. 1:13, 18).

One who is possessed by God to be God's inheritance needs to lay hold on the eternal life, to which he was called and to confess the good confession. *Eternal* denotes not only the duration of this life but also its nature, which is uncreated and incorruptible. Hence, it refers to the life of God (6:12), of which Christ as the Word of God is the embodiment (John 1:4; 1 John 1:2). Through regeneration, a person receives this life, not merely the hope of it, to become born of God (John 3:15; 1:13). Hence, we are called to this life and should confess its reality before many witnesses. Since life is by definition an organic matter, to lay hold on the eternal life, to acquire and possess it in greater degrees, is an organic process of growth towards maturity. Just as Christ's indwelling a believer as life becomes the hope of that believer's glorification (Col. 3:4; 1:27), the possession and growth of this life constitutes the hope of eternal life in the coming age (Titus 1:2), as both a positive incentive to the believer and a warning not to neglect the laying hold of it in this age (Rev. 2:7; 3:5).

The Faculty of Power to Withstand the Tide of Degradation

In his second letter to his child in the faith, the apostle Paul's concern is to prepare Timothy to meet the increasingly widespread decline among the believers (1:15). Under these circumstances, just as the apostle himself was empowered in the Lord (4:17), Timothy needed to be strengthened in order to fully accomplish his ministry and counter the downward trend among God's people (2:1-2; 4:5). For this strengthening the apostle emphasized two key factors: the human spirit (1:7) and eternal grace (v. 9). The former is the created human faculty, of which the conscience is a part (v. 3; Rom. 9:1; cf. 8:16), which becomes God's gift through the regeneration by and subsequent indwelling of the Spirit (John 3:6). The latter, eternal grace, is actually Christ Himself as the embodiment of the Triune God (2 Tim. 2:1; cf. Eph. 6:10; 1 Cor. 15:10; cf. Gal. 2:20; John 1:14, 17). Through incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection He has become the life-giving Spirit as the resurrection power (Eph. 1:19; cf. 3:16). Both the Lord and the grace of the Lord can be with the believer's spirit because they are one (2 Tim. 4:22; Phil. 4:23).

Timothy is charged to fan into flame the divine gift, probably the gift of teaching (2 Tim. 1:16; 1 Tim. 4:14), which was within him. This indicates that he needed to take the initiative. To "be empowered" in the grace which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:1), an imperative in the passive voice, also indicates an initiative being taken on Timothy's part in order for the power of grace to operate. Such an initiative has the human spirit as its locus and requires the exercise of the mind, emotion, and will (Rom. 8:6; Col. 3:2; 1:8; 2 Tim. 1:7). It is equivalent to the charge of exercising unto godliness in 1 Timothy 4:7. In the face of a discouraging and depressing situation, Timothy needed to

turn absolutely to the Lord within his spirit so that the divine grace would supply the resurrection power for him to accomplish his commission.

The Triune God and the Salvation of the Tripartite Person

Titus continues many of the themes that are found in 1 and 2 Timothy, such as faith, healthiness in teaching, words and faith, eternal life, godliness, subjective faith, and the conscience. In Titus 3:4-7, a passage echoing 1 Timothy 2:1-7, the writer unveils a full panorama of the move of God in the hypostases of His Trinity for the salvation of the entire human person. The Greek text may be rendered as follows:

Yet when the kindness and considerateness of our Savior God appeared, He saved us, not because of works done in righteousness by us but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

All three hypostases of the Trinity and God's salvation in three complete aspects are included in this wonderful declaration. God the Father in His kindness, considerateness, and mercy foreknew and foreordained that God the Son, Jesus Christ, should come as the embodiment of the Triune God to redeem fallen humankind. Through Jesus Christ, who in resurrection became the life-giving Spirit, and on the basis of His redemptive work, God the Father has richly poured out the Holy Spirit, who is the realization of the Triune God, upon the believers.

On their part, the believers are moved by such an appearing God to repent and believe in the gospel in order to be justified through the grace of Christ. This causes them to be regenerated by the Spirit in their spirit (John 3:3, 6). The Spirit's work continues to renew them through the washing of regeneration, transforming their soul (Eph. 4:23; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18) until they mature. Then they are no longer only children but heirs (Rom. 8:16-17) according to the hope of eternal life. This hope is that of the full inheritance in the coming age, where eternal life will be enjoyed as a reward in the glorified body. Ultimately, the hope of eternal life is the hope of the full manifestation of eternal life in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1-2, 14), which will be the full development of the mystery of godliness, the manifestation of God in humankind.

God's dispensing of Himself in His Trinity into tripartite humankind for the producing of the church, identified here in the three "T"s, is the basis of their divine inspiration and authority. While questions over the

circumstances and milieu of their composition may remain unanswered, their underlying structure is the working out of the same economy clearly unfolded elsewhere by the apostle Paul, who was commissioned to complete the word of God by unveiling the mysteries of this economy. No doubt, the viewpoint of this economy is different in these books, for Paul's concern is with the church's administration and shepherding, the steps needed to ensure the preservation of God's economy in the face of heresy, and the with practical illustrations of its manifestation in the lives of the members of the church. Nevertheless, all of these objectives are attained by the operation of this economy, that is, the believers' nourishment with the eternal life of the Triune God for their organic growth and transformation towards maturity. The result will be a godly reverence to those around, in whatever age and culture they are found, the adornment of the teachings of God our Savior, and the corporate embodiment of the living God, the church, as the standing column to the truth that He is.

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Notes

¹The primary source for the remainder of this article is *The Crucial Points of the Truth in Paul's Epistles*, Elders' Training, Book 6, by Witness Lee, published by Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, 1985.

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