

1

1 Timothy 1:1-7

Love me true

Ah, there's something sticking out of the letterbox. Everyone loves getting letters. They make us feel wanted. We relish tearing open those gleaming white envelopes and seeing our name flash before us on a letterhead.

But after the initial pleasure of receiving it, we aren't always thrilled by what we find inside. Bills. Advertising. Junk mail. Bank statements. Final notices.

Sometimes, however, the letter is a pleasant surprise—a note from a friend, or perhaps a wedding invitation. Sometimes it's information we need, about local council garbage collection or voting papers or a change of address. Sometimes it is essential news that we really don't want to hear, such as failed exam results or that our car needs to be registered. When someone opens a letter, you can tell within seconds what it says—you only have to look at the recipient's face.

What kind of letter is 1 Timothy? Is it a friendly personal note? Is it a catalogue of various important attributes for Christians? Is it a memo from the Boss on how to run the Company? Or does it contain aspects of each of these?

To find out more about what sort of letter this is, and why Paul wrote it, let's turn to the text itself.

Investigate

Quickly skim through 1 Timothy, taking careful note of the following verses:

1:1-3

1:18-19

3:14-4:1



4:6

4:11-16

5:21-23

6:10-14

6:20-21

1. What was the relationship between Paul and Timothy?
2. What threats was Timothy facing?
3. Why was Paul writing to him?
4. What does 3:14-15 tell us about how applicable this letter is to us?

To the householder

1 Timothy is clearly a letter from one individual to another—Paul to Timothy, his “true son in the faith”. It’s a letter to a colleague, to one who was part of Paul’s team of ministers, all of them involved in the work of preaching the gospel and building churches.

However, it is just as clearly not a private letter. As we read it, we see all sorts of instructions and commands about “how people

ought to conduct themselves in God's household, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). The church under Timothy's care, which was probably in Ephesus,* faced the difficulties and struggles which Christian churches have always faced, as we wait for the "appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14-15). Chiefly, there was the battle with false teaching, which needed to be combatted by godly leaders holding fast to the true gospel, but this was not the only challenge. Across all the spectrum of relationships in God's household—men and women, slaves and masters, widows and the married, rich and poor—Paul has instructions for what is good and acceptable in God's sight. He is training Timothy in how he ought to be conducting his ministry within God's household.

From the opening apostolic greeting, with all its force and authority, to the closing charges in the presence of the immortal majestic God of unapproachable light, this letter is more than a private note with a tightly limited application. When Paul presents his teaching about men and women in chapter 2, it is backed by all his weight as the apostle to the Gentiles (2:7), and is based on creation rather than local considerations.

Thus, as with all Scripture, the members of God's household down the centuries have found 1 Timothy useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (as Paul puts it in his second letter to Timothy).

All this may seem to be stating the obvious, but sometimes the obvious needs to be stated. The Bible was written in a concrete situation and context, but it was written for Christians in all ages and every place, as we await the return of our Lord. If we ignore the concreteness of the Bible, we can easily end up reading it out of context. But if we ignore the universality of the Bible, we reject God's word to us here and now.

Putting these introductory matters aside, let us now turn to the opening verses and Paul's instructions to Timothy.

* The Greek text of 1 Timothy 1:3 is a little unusual, and there is some doubt as to whether Timothy was actually in Ephesus when he received Paul's letter. The reference to Ephesus may refer to an earlier instruction from Paul to Timothy of which we are unaware. The sense could be: "Just as I urged you (to stay in Ephesus, when I was going through Macedonia), so now you ought to stay where you are [wherever that is] so that you might command certain men, etc." In the end, it would be better not to be too definite about where Timothy was when he received Paul's letter.

Problems in the household

Timothy's task was a daunting one. He was charged with a difficult assignment for a young minister: prohibiting false teachers. It seems that the church ran the risk of becoming distracted from the gospel, and Paul urges Timothy to ensure that the truth, rather than myths and controversy, prevails.



Investigate

Read 1 Timothy 1:1-7.

1. List the wrong practices of the “certain men” in verses 1-7.
2. From the passage, why are these practices considered wrong (see also 2 Tim 2:14; Titus 3:9)?
3. What is the right way to do God's work?
4. What is Timothy to do about this situation, and what is his aim in doing so?

Paul urges Timothy to take strong and decisive action to silence the false teachers, and the aim of it all is love (v. 5). This is an important lesson for us. In our world, taking action to silence someone is considered the very opposite of love. These days it is almost a crime to say that there is such a thing as truth and error, let alone to insist that we are in possession of the truth, not to mention commanding our opponents to keep quiet! For the modern person, everything is open to debate, and everyone's opinion must be respected as equally valid. To quieten certain teachings because they were wrong and/or unhelpful would be considered intolerant and narrow-minded.

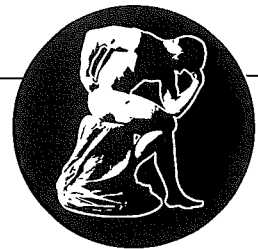
Yet for Paul, it is the essence of love and sincere faith. Love seeks the good of others. And since false teaching and idle religious speculation only leads away from God, it can never be for people's good to allow it to continue unchecked. This sort of false doctrine and speculation is no way to manage God's household. It is not "in faith"—it does not proceed from a sure trust in the gospel, and the clean heart and good conscience that go along with it. Instead, teachers of this sort wander off into meaningless talk, especially about the law. (More on this in our next study.)

In the face of this situation, love must be tough. It must recognize that false or speculative teaching is not harmless, for it affects our lives. It ruins the good conscience we have in the gospel. It enslaves us.

In saying this, the Bible isn't suggesting that *all* debate and discussion is unhelpful. Often, we need to talk hard and long before we come to a consensus of understanding. However, such talk must not be meaningless or unfruitful or divert us from a sincere trust in God our Saviour and Christ Jesus our hope.

Think it through

1. In what ways have false teachers in our own day wandered from the truth? Can you think of current examples of fruitless controversies?



2. Look up these passages:

Jer 23:16-20

Matt 7:15-23

Gal 1:6-9

2 Tim 2:22-26

Titus 1:7-11

How are we to respond to false teaching?

3. "True understanding comes from the heart, which leads to love, and not from the mind, which leads to controversy."

Do you agree?

Why/why not?

(You might also look at Rom 12:2; Eph 4:20-23; Col 1:9-12.)

4. What do you think is the relationship between love and truth?

5. What dangers can you think of in applying Paul's command to silence false teachers? How might verse 5 help?