

5. THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

SCRIPTURE: 1 TIMOTHY 1:1-11; 2 TIMOTHY 1:1-2; TITUS 1:1a, 1

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Because of the change in the church school year, this lesson begins a new unit based on the Pastoral Epistles. MATURE YEARS will continue following the International Lesson Series, therefore portions of two units may appear in one issue. (See April-May-June, 1964, issue, page 15, for the new division of the church school year.)

Lesson for October 4: John Wesley and the apostle Paul would have been amazed at our means of communication today. Lacking inter-continental television and even the telephone, they used the best means of communication at hand. They wrote letters.

We have many of Paul's letters in the heart of the New Testament. But there were later letters by other leaders. Three of these are called "Pastoral Epistles" because they were addressed to pastors of local churches. The Letters are First and Second Timothy and Titus. Scholars date the first two at about A.D. 125, and Titus anywhere from 100 to 125.

But, you may say, all three Letters plainly state that they were written by Paul—the first two to Timothy, his "true child in the faith," and the third to Titus, another assistant in the work of establishing Christian churches in Europe and Asia.

Bible scholars question Paul's authorship of these Letters on historical, theological, and literary grounds. They believe that the three Pastoral Letters were written long after the final

imprisonment and martyrdom of the Apostle.

Why, then, did someone use Paul's name and write to pastors as though the great Apostle were addressing them? In those times it was a very common practice for someone of less reputation to use the name of a respected leader of the past to lend force to what he had to say. Such writing was not plagiarism at all. The unknown leaders who wrote the three Pastoral Epistles was immersed in the thought and work of Paul. Moreover, this writer undoubtedly possessed and, at times, probably quoted, pieces of writing by the great missionary to the gentiles.

In writing as he did to pastors in the early part of A.D. 200 this church leader had no qualms of conscience about using Paul's name, and we may be sure that the recipients of the letters were not in the least perturbed. They knew that the leader was addressing them as a devoted follower of Paul.

This leader, whose name we do not know, used the names of Timothy and Titus as symbols of all Christian pastors of his time. In these letters he faithfully applied Paul's teaching to the problems arising in the first-century churches.

At the turn of the second century the Christian movement was becoming an organization. An entire generation of Christians had passed on and another was taking its place. It became apparent that the expected return of Christ Jesus was to be delayed still further. To keep the movement from disintegrating, pastors and superintendents organized local groups, established them firmly, and counseled them against heretical and immoral influences.

The worst of these heresies was that of the Gnostics. In origin this heresy was neither Jewish nor Christian; it was largely built up by borrowing from other philosophies. The Gnostics attempted to take over the Christian movement, denying its historic teachings and utterly corrupting its morals.

Dualistic in their thinking, the Gnostics claimed to be spiritual adepts, having contempt

MEMORY SELECTION

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. —1 Timothy 1:5

for everything physical and material. Theologically the teachers taught that the spiritual Christ could not come in a physical body, for the spirit was considered good but the body, evil. "Jesus was one; Christ was another."

On the side of morals the Gnostic contempt for the body led to a feeling that nothing the body might do could be of any great importance. Thus the doors were thrown open to every form of self-indulgence.

This insidious teaching had crept into the churches in the generation succeeding Paul's, especially as the second century dawned.

Gnosticism was not the only heresy that second-century Christian leaders had to combat; there were also others. But if we are to judge from the Pastoral and Johannine Letters, Gnosticism was the main foe of the Christian movement at that time.

The responsible leaders of the movement had succeeded in freeing Christianity from Judaistic bonds and from heretical onslaughts. The movement's success was in part through letters such as the three Pastorals. We shall study these in some detail in future weeks this fall.