

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE CHARACTER OF TIMOTHY AS REFLECTED
IN THE LETTERS ADDRESSED TO HIM BY
THE APOSTLE PAUL.*

A POPULAR APOLOGETIC.

BEFORE attempting to develop the character of Timothy as that is revealed in the Pauline Epistles, a previous question has to be considered, namely, how far have we a right to expect that these letters will give us what we are in search of. That must surely depend upon the author of them, and the nature of his communications. If a writer deal in vague commonplaces and toothless platitudes, if he is content with a few conventional compliments, or if his purpose is simply to recount his own experiences, or to touch upon some trivial matter, then it would be unreasonable to think that we should find the characters of his correspondent reflected in the letters addressed to him.

But in the case before us the facts are the reverse of all this. The Apostle is writing to a young comrade who is engaged with himself in the perilous undertaking of establishing a new religion in the Roman world; he clearly foresees a time of increasing trial, his own future was threatening and uncertain, while the position occupied by Timothy at Ephesus was like that of the advanced guard of an army in a bitterly hostile country. Under these circumstances the older man writes to the younger in order to instruct him upon various points of church order that might possibly arise, and further, to nerve him for the inevitable conflict. With such objects in view, the nature of his many appeals and exhortations would be governed by the character of the man to whom he wrote. Both the love and the fear of the Apostle would lead him to iterate and re-iterate injunctions which would reveal much of his own thought concerning Timothy. We are justified then in using these

letters as mirrors in which we may find a character reflected; and our point must be to see whether the character so discovered does at all fit in with what elsewhere we may learn as to Timothy's circumstances and antecedents.

Confining ourselves to the statements of the New Testament, or to direct deductions from them, it would seem that Timothy was a child of one of those mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles, which must often have obtained in remote districts, however much they may have been discountenanced by the central ecclesiastical authorities at Jerusalem. We are told that his mother was a Jewess, but his father was a Greek, his parents living in the region of Lystra and Derbe, though in which of these two cities they resided is not clear. His mother and grandmother were godly women, who, from his earliest years, did their best to instruct the child in the ancient Scriptures of their faith. To what extent the father was an active element in the lad's life does not appear, nor is it known whether he was even a proselyte to the Jewish religion.

However this may be, when Paul came into the district preaching the new faith in Christ, declaring that in Jesus was to be found the long-promised Messiah of his people, Timothy became a convert, for the Apostle calls him his own son in the faith (1 Tim. i. 2), and on the occasion of his second visit to Lycaonia, the great preacher found him already held in high esteem by the Christian community, public opinion confirming his own judgment that in this young man he had discovered one who would be peculiarly fitted to accompany himself on his missionary journeys. Having both Jewish and Greek blood in his veins, the young evangelist would be able to sympathise with the religious inquirers of both nationalities in any difficulties they might feel in receiving the gospel; whilst his gentle spirit and untiring devotion would make him a choice companion in travel.

From prudential motives, rather as a matter of expediency than of principle, Paul had Timothy circumcised, and it is an open question whether this action would have a beneficial effect upon a temperament which perhaps by nature was too much inclined to a policy of compromise. One may possibly trace some later developments to the influence exerted upon Timothy at a critical juncture by this diplomatic act on the part of the Apostle.

After accompanying Paul on various journeys, for we meet with him at Philippi, at Berea, and at Corinth, the young minister seems, at a later date, to have been stationed at Ephesus in charge of the Christian community there; and it was whilst in that great centre of pagan worship that the letters which bear his name were addressed to him by the Apostle from his prison-house in Rome.

It is worth while trying to conceive to ourselves the situation at Ephesus, the atmosphere in which Timothy was called upon to discharge his Christian ministry, for the evidence goes to show that his was a nature likely to be keenly sensitive to the conditions under which his work had to be done.

To begin with, Ephesus was the seat of the worship of Diana, her temple was a magnificent building dominating the entire city, and on it wealth and taste had lavished their utmost. Everything was done to attract the eye, to inspire with awe and wonder. Its courts were daily thronged with worshippers from every quarter of the Roman Empire. Perhaps it was under the shadow of the great temple, and in the presence of all this splendid pageantry of worship, that Timothy had to shepherd the flock of Christ, to lead the unadorned worship, and to administer the austere simple ordinances of the primitive Church. It must have required a firm courage, an eye undimmed for spiritual things, for a man with Greek blood in his veins, and trained from childhood to think with reverent delight upon the temple

worship at Jerusalem, to hold on unabashed, and not sometimes to have been visited with a sort of undefined wish that in some way or other he might be able to blend together the body of a splendid ritual with the soul of a spiritual Christian service. One can imagine him, not exactly ashamed of Christ, but feeling like a dissenter in a cathedral city. He believes himself to be right, but he wishes that he had not to breathe so much of the chilling air of social contempt. Perhaps his position might find a modern parallel in that of a *native* Christian teacher, whose work shall lie—say in Benares, the metropolis of Hindooism, if the supposition be added that India were not under British, but under native rule.

If this was the condition outside the body of Christian disciples, there were elements at work inside that body with which Timothy had to reckon. Oriental speculation had its chosen home at Ephesus, and the Judaising tendency, which had been rampant in Galatia, was not wholly absent. These two influences, apparently so diverse, conspired against the simplicity that is in Christ. It was beginning to be a cherished dream with certain minds that a sort of eclectic religion might be developed out of a union of philosophic speculation, Jewish ritualism, and the gospel of Christ. These people did not mean to deny the gospel, but only to enrich it; they would rid it of its barrenness, and, in a non-apostolic sense, adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour. Did Timothy ever look with a secret longing in their direction and suffer the pangs of conflict between his taste and his spiritual convictions? Possibly he did.

In addition to these religious, or quasi-religious elements of Ephesian life, we may be sure that there was, ever present, the abounding licentiousness which distinguished populations in which the Greek and the Oriental mingled; the darker vices of the Asiatic were partly veiled by the

flashing splendours of the Greek imagination, and becoming less repulsive, were the more dangerous.

Keeping these several points before us, namely, Timothy's parentage and up-bringing, his kindly and lovable nature, his comparative youth, and the social and religious environment of his Ephesian life, let us turn to the two Epistles, which, probably in rapid succession, Paul addressed to him, to see whether they confirm these suggestions as to his character, which have already been thrown out.

Certainly he drew to himself the affection of the Apostle to an unusual degree. Paul speaks of him with almost a maternal tenderness. He calls him "my true child in the faith—my child Timothy; Timothy, my beloved child." It was not only that Paul was now an old man, whilst Timothy was comparatively young, but it was that the latter preserved the child-like filial temper: in his manhood his faith had the simplicity of a child—it was faith unfeigned. He did his work as a child serving with his father in a common undertaking (Phil. ii. 22). Standing at the Apostle's side, or within easy reach of him, he was prepared to do and to dare much; but it is to be observed that Paul never calls him by that vigorous epithet, "my fellow-soldier," though he does bid him fight the good fight of faith. Curiously, when the Christian veteran thinks of him and prays for him, he remembers his friend by his tears, tears not of weakness, but of a very tender heart.

Such a character is as rare as it is delightful; it meant unstinted service, unselfish devotion, an almost instinctive care for the welfare of others. It is much to preserve a gentle heart in this hard world. But in our poor human nature men often have what are called the vices of their virtues; strength may cast a rude shadow, gentleness may lack firmness, and wide sympathies are apt to be feeble in their grasp of truth. There are minds that see so much good in all things that they see not the supreme good any-

where. How was it with Timothy? Let us turn again to the apostolic letters and see.

Does it not look as though he were lacking in a due self-confidence, and, underrating his powers, failed to cultivate them as he ought? What is the meaning of the exhortation, "Let no man despise thy youth," taken in conjunction with a reference to Timothy in the first Corinthian Epistle—"If Timothy come, see that he be with you without fear; let no man despise him"? Does it not suggest a man somewhat timid and faltering, afraid to take the position that was his due, and so falling a prey to hard-faced, brazen men, who instantly interpret such a bearing as an invitation to impertinence? And is not the inference sustained by the exhortation, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee"; an exhortation repeated later in a more energetic form—"Stir up the gift of God that is in thee"?

It is possible for a man to come to such a point of self-depreciation as to cease to make the best of himself, letting God-given powers rust away, because he cannot persuade himself that he possesses them. And so he may give way to idle musings, and find himself surpassed by inferior but more vigorous men.

Paul was bent on doing his utmost to urge Timothy to hopeful activity; he plies him with exhortations to this end. "Be diligent," he says, "to present thyself approved unto God; exercise thyself unto godliness; I charge thee . . . preach the word." This is not the language usually addressed to a strenuous and eager man; it was as though the oft infirmities had sapped the vigour of the young minister, disposing him not so much to go backward as not to go forward, contented with the position of acceptance and esteem which he had so early gained. Perhaps a rougher training would have made him a stronger man, working in him that useful obstinacy which can hold on its way in all sorts of providential weather.

As we have seen, within the Church itself there was a tendency to vain speculation—vain at least to us, brought up in the hurry and hard practical temper of the West. Indeed it is difficult for us to understand its subtle charm for the Oriental and the Greek, but charm them it did. Avowedly Christian men were beginning to be attracted by misty theosophic philosophies, which conceived of a whole series of created intelligences, higher than man and lower than Christ, who in some way or other should intervene between the High and Holy One and this gross and palpable world. By means of these they sought to soften down certain aspects of the gospel which came into collision with long-cherished beliefs.

It is more than conceivable that Timothy looked in the direction of these ideas, or, at least, did not oppose to them a determined front; he felt their vague attraction, and did not clearly see the errors that lay within them. To him they were the legitimate and harmless endeavours of the human mind to fill up the gaps in revelation, and so to construct a symmetrical system, the main outline of which the gospel should supply.

To Paul, trained in a sterner school, and endowed with a more masculine intellect, these airy speculations were hateful. He saw that they entangled the mind, sapped the spiritual strength, and dimmed the supreme glory of Christ. He saw that they put the ever-blessed God at a long distance from the world He had made, and turned Him into a sort of absentee proprietor, who hands over the actual management of affairs to subordinates. Certainly he speaks of these teachers of an improved gospel with very scanty respect. He tells Timothy that he had arranged for his stay in Ephesus, that he might put a check upon some who were giving heed to fables and endless genealogies. He bluntly declares that if any departed from the wholesome words of Christ, he was a conceited person, knowing

nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words; and he sharply bids Timothy refuse what he calls profane and old wives' fables, and give himself to the exercise of practical godliness. Almost his last words in the First Epistle consist of a very urgent appeal to his friend to guard the sacred deposit committed to him—the pure gospel—and to turn away once for all from profane and vain babblings, and the oppositions of a knowledge, which indeed was no knowledge, but was falsely so called. An indication surely that the young pastor had been tempted to dabble in those speculations which claimed to lead men into a more perfect knowledge of the truth.

It would seem that in the interval between the despatch of the first Epistle and the second, no very reassuring intelligence had reached the Apostle with respect to the stand which Timothy was taking at Ephesus, for we find him renewing his injunctions with a sharpness that indicates a growing uneasiness. He is not satisfied, and so he will say again with emphasis what he has already said. "Shun," he says, "profane babblings: their word will eat as doth a canker." "Avoid," he adds, "foolish and unlearned questions, knowing that they do gender strife)." (Unlearned questions—what a home-thrust that is at the philosophers!) And then, as though he would clench the whole matter, he says, almost sternly, "Abide thou in the things which thou hast learned, and hast been assured of, knowing from whom thou hast learned them."

Now we may not say that such language proves that Timothy had seriously lapsed from the faith that is in Christ, but it does indicate that there was a certain hesitancy about him—an irresolution which, coupled with a speculative vein, threw him unduly open to every novelty. He was not only ready to listen to it, which perhaps he was sometimes bound to do, but he was prejudiced in favour

of it, and he needed to be recalled from these voyages upon a misty sea to the practices of a godly life, and to the clear glories of that gospel which had been committed to his charge. There were tendencies in him, which, unchecked, might disqualify him for the noble but perilous duties of the Christian ministry.

One point more remains, as being clearly reflected in both the Epistles. There can be no doubt that the position of a Christian teacher and leader of the flock of God in Ephesus made a very great demand upon actual courage. The new faith brought trouble to its confessors of a sort peculiarly hard to bear. The worshippers of Diana were strong in the support of the trade of the town, and in the countenance of the municipality and of the state. They were the aristocratic party, and we may be sure they did not disguise their contempt for the new religion and for those who professed it,—a religion, they would say, started by a Jew who was condemned to death as a criminal, and who died upon a cross. It were absurd to think that such a religion could live and hold its own when it was well known that Asia, and indeed, the whole world, worshipped the great goddess Diana, whose image occupied the inner shrine of their glorious temple.

The Judaizing section in the Church would contribute their element of difficulty, for they were impatient of the simplicity of its ordinances, and the nakedness, as they would say, of its worship. And the would-be philosophers longed to weld into the central teaching of the cross some of their own surmises, which they were pleased to call a gnosis, a higher knowledge.

Now there are men who are able to face such a situation unmoved; they are furnished with a firmness of temper which can doggedly hold on its way, and shut out the influences that sadly distress and paralyse minds of another make, and Timothy certainly was of another make, his

tender, sensitive nature would make him keenly sensible of the difficulties of his position.

Perhaps, says Dean Paget, the strength, the wickedness, the wealth, the confidence of paganism at Ephesus at times appalled and staggered him ; there seemed something irresistibly discouraging in the brilliance, the culture, the self-sufficiency of the society which ignored and ridiculed him. As a consequence he was in danger of being ashamed of the faith that brought such trouble. Paul was cognisant of this, and in the second Epistle seeks to banish the fears of Timothy, and to stir him up to a soldierly courage. Surely it is significant that this aspect of things is scarcely touched upon in the first letter, indicating that a new development had taken place both of trial and of character. "God has not given us," he says, "the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not thou ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me, His prisoner, but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel, according to the power of God." "Be strong," he says later, "and endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." He appeals to him as though he were a sentry on duty: "Watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry."

He plies Timothy with an argument that must have gone straight to his heart. "I also suffer," he says, "nevertheless I am not ashamed." Yes, and more, Onesiphorus, whom you know so well, he was not ashamed of my chain, but when he was in Rome he sought me out very diligently and found me. He returns again and again to his own condition as giving force to his appeals, and a right to make them. "I suffer trouble, as an evil-doer, even unto bonds . . . I endure all things. Thou hast fully known my doctrine and manner of life . . . and what persecutions I endured." And then he adds with a sorrowful sort of steadfastness, "yea, and all that will live godly in Christ

Jesus shall suffer persecution." As though he would have Timothy understand that there could be no sort of escape, unless indeed, he gave up the faith he professed.

In bringing this paper to a conclusion, it may be claimed that the character deduced from the various passages in the two Epistles hangs together, and is consistent with the conditions under which Timothy lived, and the circumstances of his parentage and upbringing; we feel that we have been dealing with a real person. That he was a man of a lovable nature, and of fine piety, need hardly be said; that he possessed qualities that indicated his fitness for a difficult post, must also be admitted; for Paul would never have asked him to undertake the onerous duties involved in the supervision of the Christian Church at Ephesus, if he had not been endowed with some fitness to discharge them; but he was not a man who could stand firmly alone.

It is inconceivable that the apostle should so often have urged him to take a bold stand, if he had evidently possessed a dauntless courage; nor would he so often have warned him against the claims of a false knowledge, if he had not been over-inclined to listen to them; nor would he have bidden him see to it that no man despised his youth, if it had been a needless injunction. We may safely say that when Paul himself was known as a young man, whose name was Saul, at whose feet the murderers of Stephen cast down their clothes, no one would have despised him.

It is reported that Timothy remained at Ephesus for many years after Paul's death; if so, it is just within the bounds of possibility that he was none other than the angel of the Church in that city, who is addressed in one of the letters to the seven churches which were in Asia. And again, if so, it is interesting to observe that something of the same type of character is there suggested, as that which we have already discovered. "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, . . . and that for my

sake thou hast laboured, and hast not fainted." There is the unassuming, long suffering, laborious man, who wins all our hearts, "But," continues the Divine Word, "I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." Was that the sorrowful explanation of wavering and of weakness? We cannot tell, but if it was, it explains all.

The authenticity of the pastoral epistles has been called in question: Renan, in his bold way, calls the writer of them a forger, who perhaps incorporated some authentic notes of Paul in his apocryphal composition; and the School of Baur, as might have been expected, gives them short shrift, rejecting the whole of them. Such criticism can be met on its own ground, but is there not another method? Forgery stumbles, not when it sets itself deliberately to delineate character, but when character is not so much carefully outlined as taken for granted, and made the groundwork (almost invisible) of the superstructure. And if we have discovered in these letters a character consistent with itself and with its circumstances, if a score of delicate suggestions make us feel that we are dealing with a living man, who is being dealt with by one stronger than himself, whose words vibrate with the personal element, then we feel that we have got into that atmosphere in which the mere literary actor and the forger cannot live, and we gain a new evidence that these two letters are rightly entitled the First and the Second Epistles of Paul the Apostle to Timothy.

EDWARD MEDLEY.