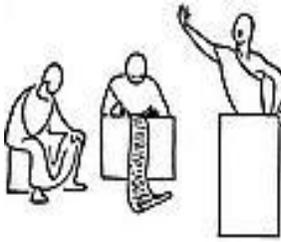


## EPISTLES

### THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES



Ancient letters were usually written on papyrus sheets or scrolls. The authors could write the message themselves, but more often they would dictate the message to a professional scribe. Sometimes the scribe or amanuensis would compose the letter on behalf of the sender. The papyrus was folded or rolled, then tied and sealed, and usually delivered by a slave or a hired messenger or a friend of the sender.

True letters were genuine correspondence directed to specific persons or groups on definite occasions. Literary epistles were documents of more lasting importance, such as addresses or treatises, which were intended for a wider audience.

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**HELLENISTIC LETTERS** were often composed according to a rather rigid form which usually included these elements:

- A **prescription** with the names of the sender and recipient plus greeting.
- A formal **preamble** with wishes for good health and prayers for the recipient.
- The **main body** of the letter, which may contain advice, instructions, business matters, or a travel itinerary.
- A **conclusion** with personal wishes and greetings to friends.
- A final **greeting** in the sender's own handwriting.

In some cases the rhetorical forms of different kinds of letters became highly stylized depending on their purpose, such as letters of introduction, apology or defense, and consolation.

Some of the letters follow the conventions of **GRECO-ROMAN RHETORIC**, especially speeches of persuasion, which normally included these steps:

- An **exordium** is designed to attract attention and gain a sympathetic hearing.
- A **narratio** relates the events leading to the situation at hand.
- A **propositio** presents the thesis or states the case.
- A **probatio** presents a series of proofs which confirm the thesis.
- A **refutatio** forestalls objections or refutes an opponent's arguments.
- A **peroratio** concludes the speech, sometimes with a call to action.

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### UNIQUE CHRISTIAN FORMS

The New Testament letters and epistles usually follow these conventions, although most of them are longer than typical everyday correspondence. Furthermore, they are not rigid imitations of the standard forms; rather, they are adapted to the style of their religious contents and often include other literary forms, such as:

- lists of vices and virtues,
- parenetic passages with instructions for ethical behavior,
- catechetical materials with the teachings of the faith,
- homilies and sermons,
- fragments of hymns, creeds, prayers, and other liturgical material, and
- arguments cast in the form of a diatribe.

## THE PAULINE LETTERS

In the course of his journeys the apostle Paul wrote many letters to the congregations he had or intended to visit. The church has preserved thirteen letters attributed to him in its canon, partly because they were read in worship services. No doubt others of his letters have not survived.

Although Paul's letters cannot be dated precisely, 1 Thessalonians appears to be the earliest, written around 50 CE; Romans is the latest, from around 55-58 CE. Many scholars would propose a sequence similar to this:

1 Thessalonians	52	Philippians	55
Galatians	52-53 or 55-56	Philemon	55
1 & 2 Corinthians	54-55-56	Romans	56

Most scholars now doubt whether Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians and the so-called "Pastoral Epistles" to Timothy and Titus were actually written by Paul, while acknowledging that they come from his tradition. Hebrews was definitely not written by Paul.

## THE CATHOLIC EPISTLES

The remaining documents attributed to James, Peter, John and Jude have more of the characteristics of literary epistles. Most of them give the appearance of being addressed to Christians in general, rather than to specific congregations. They are largely pseudonymous or anonymous. Most of them were not accepted into the official canon until as late as 200 or 300 CE.

## READING SOMEONE ELSE'S MAIL

In the ancient world no matter how stylized letters appeared, they were taken to be a near substitute for their senders. The letter writer was considered to be present when and where the letter was read. This was partly due to the fact that all letters were read out loud and, especially in the case of the New Testament letters, they were read to a family or group or church assembly.

The biblical letters show a peculiar combination of authority and equality between their senders and recipients. Most ancient letters betray a self-conscious awareness of the different social status of the writer and the reader, but such obvious distinctions are uncommon in the New Testament.

Yet these documents are not the correspondence of real equals, for there is an assumption that the writers carry the aura of apostolic authority and that they and their auditors promote values which are substantially different from their surrounding society. When we read these letters today, we can learn to appreciate them by imagining that we are reading some else's mail, keeping in mind that we will hear only one side of the dialogue

By appreciating the personal interaction represented by each letter, by reading between the lines to determine how the other side of the conversation would have been argued, and by focusing on the human problem which occasioned the letter, we contemporary men and women can still find ourselves critiqued and encouraged by these documents and addressed by their ethical and personal messages.

## THE HEART OF THE FAITH

"Justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith" is at the center of an evangelical understanding of the gospel.

This formula, based on Paul's writings, is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls, according to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformers.

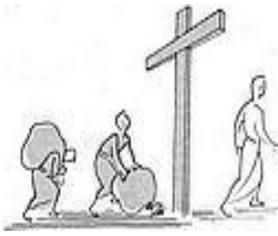
Is this teaching still important today?

Could there be other legitimate ways of expressing the heart of the Christian faith?

If so, how would you phrase it?

# ROMANS

## AGENDA FOR RELIGION



### A HOLY WASHING

One of the most distinctive Christian ceremonies is Baptism, a ritual washing in which a representative of the church applies water to an initiate.

In what sense can this be thought of as a divine action: a dying and rising with Christ, a rebirth experience, acceptance into the family of God?

Or is it primarily an act of discipleship: a commitment to living as part of God's people?

In other words, is Baptism a "sacrament" or an "ordinance"?

In either case, what is its real meaning for one's life?

Paul wrote to the Roman church during his last missionary journey, while he was in Corinth in the spring of 58 CE. The church there had not been established or even visited by Paul; most likely it had been formed by Christian immigrants from Palestine and Syria. Most of the members of the house churches in Rome were Gentile converts, but they also contained a number of Jewish Christians. Their ethnic and religious mix created tensions between those who were "stronger" in their faith and those who were "weaker."

### A STRATEGY FOR MISSION

Paul intended to go from Corinth to Jerusalem with the collection he had gathered for the Judean Christians. Then he hoped to travel to Rome. After staying there for a few months, he wanted to use the Roman church as his starting point for a missionary journey to Spain. Therefore Paul's purpose in writing was to commend himself, his apostolic ministry and his gospel, to the Roman Christians. If they would accept him and his teachings, then they would be more likely to sponsor his next missionary trip.

### PAUL AS AN AMBASSADOR

Romans is written in the style of an ambassadorial letter. Paul considers himself an emissary of Christ and writes in a way that is calculated to make a favorable impression on the people to whom he is being sent.

He does this by summarizing the Gospel he has preached during his career as a missionary and centers it around the theme of God's righteousness or justice, which is demonstrated by the way God keeps his promises and justifies sinners by grace for Christ's sake.

Paul uses a variety of rhetorical styles. In some cases his argument is cast in Jewish forms, with a heavy emphasis on quotations from scripture (as in sections A and C in the outline). In other cases it has a Hellenistic flavor, which can take the form of a diatribe (as in sections B and D).

There is some question about whether the concluding chapter was originally part of the letter to the Romans. For it is difficult to understand how Paul could have known so many people in a church he had never visited. Also, the closing doxology may not be Pauline.

### RIGHTNESS: THE CENTRAL ISSUE

Romans continues to have a major influence on Christian doctrine because it is such a thorough summary of Paul's teaching. Modern readers can identify with the central issue, namely, how to put things right at the center of one's life. Is it through personal achievement and performance measured against legal norms? Or is it through trusting the promises of God?

Another continuing concern is the impact which one's centering beliefs have on the way we as contemporary men and women live out our lives in their many relationships. Most modern ethical theories stress individual virtues and personal accountability. Paul, however, puts greater emphasis on communal values and interpersonal responsibilities. His approach may offer a valuable alternative vision for those who believe their social norms are eroding.

*Salutation (1:1-7)*

*Thanksgiving (1:8-15)*

**A. Theological Section**

1. *Theme: The Power of the Gospel to Save (1:16-17)*
2. *The Revelation of God's Wrath*
  - a. *on the ungodly Gentiles (1:18-2:11)*
  - b. *on the Jews who have the law (2:12-3:20)*
3. *The Revelation of God's Righteousness*
  - a. *on the basis of faith, not law (3:21-31)*
  - b. *as in the case of Abraham (4:1-25)*

**B. Anthropological Section**

1. *Theme: The New Life of Believers (5:1-5)*
2. *The Role of Jesus in the Life of a Believer*
  - a. *who reconciles believers to God (5:6-11)*
  - b. *whose obedient death wins life (5:12-21)*
3. *The Shape of the Believer's New Life*
  - a. *death to sin through baptism (6:1-11)*
  - b. *freedom from slavery to sin (6:12-23)*
  - c. *death to the law (7:1-24)*
4. *The Role of the Spirit in the Life of a Believer*
  - a. *who lives in Christ's people (8:1-11)*
  - b. *who aids creation and the elect (8:12-39)*

**C. Historical Section**

1. *Theme: Israel's Rejection of Christ (9:1-5)*
2. *God's Faithfulness to His Promise*
  - a. *as he freely shows mercy (9:6-18)*
  - b. *although some do not acknowledge him (9:19-29)*
3. *Israel's Rejection for Lack of Faith*
  - a. *by pursuing righteousness by law (9:30-10:4)*
  - b. *by ignoring the promise (10:5-21)*
4. *The Extension of the Promise to the Gentiles*
  - a. *as a result of Israel's temporary rejection (11:1-12)*
  - b. *who are grafted into Israel (11:13-24)*
  - c. *so all Israel will be saved (11:25-32)*
5. *Hymn: The Unfathomable Greatness of God (11:33-36)*

**D. Ethical Section**

1. *Theme: The Christians' Life as Worship (12:1-2)*
2. *The Relationships of Christians*
  - a. *within their communities (12:3-13)*
  - b. *with outsiders in society (12:14-21)*
  - c. *with the political authorities (13:1-7)*
  - d. *on the basis of the love command (13:8-10)*
  - e. *with an eschatological proviso (13:11-14)*
3. *Specific Problems in the Roman Churches*
  - a. *the scruples of the weak (14:1-12)*
  - b. *the non-judgmental attitude of the strong (14:13-23)*
  - c. *following the example of Christ (15:1-13)*

*Paul's Plans and Purpose in Writing (15:14-33)*

*Letter of Commendation for Phoebe (16:1-16)*

*Concluding Warning and Greetings (16:17-20, 21-23)*

*Doxology (6:25-27)*



**MINORITY RIGHTS**

Paul tried to balance the prerogatives of those who were strong in the faith with the rights of those who were weak.

In every social grouping there will be some who hold a minority position. What rights do minorities have?

What obligations do the majority have in relation to the minority?

Who should be ready to bend or give in?

Does it make a difference if the social grouping is religious or secular?



## A COMPLEX OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The canonical form of the Corinthian correspondence gives fascinating insights into early Christian history.

1 Corinthians reveals some of the problems of living in a congregation. 2 Corinthians shows the issues of being valued as an apostle.

Modern readers can easily identify with the Corinthians' moral dilemmas. Sexual ethics, women's place in society, worship traditions, life after death, charitable contributions, the rights of minorities, the role of authority—all are contemporary issues.

The question is how, or whether, focusing on the cross of Christ can still bring those issues into a helpful perspective.

Paul's own posture of living "between the times" may still be the most realistic stance. It offers the possibility of being able to deal with the hard issues of life without either ignoring them or being undone by them.

## 1 & 2 CORINTHIANS A CONFUSED COMMUNITY

Paul visited Corinth, the capital and chief seaport of southern Greece, around 49-51 CE. The congregation he founded included a variety of Gentile converts—wealthy, poor, intellectuals, ecstatics, slaves, libertines—in addition to some Jewish Christians. After he left, the church later split into factions; “progressive” and “conservative” groups opposed each other. The Hellenistic-Jewish propaganda and the Gnostic speculations of some missionaries who followed Paul led to ecstatic excesses and loose morals.

A series of letters and visits was required for Paul to correct this situation during the three years he was headquartered at Ephesus, around 53-54 or 55-56 CE. He had to assert his apostolic authority and use all his skill to call the Corinthians back to constructive living and united worship.

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### *Salutation & Thanksgiving (1:1-3, 4-9)*

### 1 CORINTHIANS

#### A. *The Problem of Disunity in the Corinthian Church*

1. *Statement of the problem (1:10-17)*
2. *Haggadic homily on Wisdom and the Cross (1:18-3:23)*
3. *Application to the Corinthians (4:1-21)*

#### B. *The Problem of Moral Abuses in the Church*

1. *Sexual immorality (5:1-13)*
2. *Litigation against fellow-Christians (6:1-11)*
3. *Prostitution (6:12-20)*

#### C. *Answers to the Corinthians' Questions*

1. *concerning Marriage (7:1-24)*
2. *concerning Virginity (7:25-40)*
3. *concerning Food offered to idols (8:1-11:1)*
4. *Worship traditions: Women, and the Lord's Supper (11:2-16, 17-34)*
5. *concerning Spiritual gifts in worship (12:1-14:40)*
6. *the Resurrection (15:1-58)*
7. *concerning the Collection and Paul's plans (16:1-14)*

*Instructions and Greetings & Postscript (16:15-20, 21-24)*

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### *Salutation & Blessing-Thanksgiving (1:1-3, 3-7)*

### 2 CORINTHIANS

#### A. *Paul's Ministry with the Corinthians*

1. *Paul's boasting on behalf of the Corinthians (1:8-22)*
2. *His change in travel plans (1:23-2:13)*
3. *Titus' encouraging news (7:5-16)*

#### B. *Paul's Defense of His Apostolic Office*

1. *Paul's boldness and confidence (2:14-3:18)*
2. *The "earthenware" form of his ministry (4:1-5:10)*
3. *An appeal to the Corinthians (5:11-6:13, 7:2-4)*  
*[Interpolation: Perfect holiness (6:14-7:1)]*

#### C. *Paul's Collection for the Church at Jerusalem*

1. *Appeal to complete the collection (8:1-24)*
2. *Commendation for participating in the collection (9:1-15)*

- D. *Paul's Defense of His Apostolic Ministry*
1. *Introduction (10:1-6)*
  2. *Refutation of his opponents slanders (10:7-11:15)*
  3. *Reluctant self-defense and boastings (11:16-12:13)*
  4. *Plans for a third visit to Corinth (12:14-13:10)*
  5. *Conclusion & Blessing (13:11-13, 14)*

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## A GROWING CORRESPONDENCE

The harsh transitions and seemingly contradictory information in 2 Corinthians, and to some extent in 1 Corinthians, suggest that the canonical books are edited versions of a more extensive series of letters. Thus it is helpful to conjecture a reconstruction of the sequence of events, such as the following:

Stephanus and friends (1 Cor. 16:17-18) visit Paul in Ephesus with a bad report about conditions in Corinth.

Paul sends Stephanus back with  
**Letter A.**  
 1 Cor. 6:12-20  
 1 Cor. 9:24-10:22  
 1 Cor. 11:2-34  
 1 Cor. 15:1-58  
 1 Cor. 16:13-24  
 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 (?)

Meanwhile, Chloe's people (1 Co. 1:11) bring a letter from Corinth (1 Cor. 7:1) to Paul.

Paul replies to the Corinthians with  
**Letter B.**  
 1 Cor. 1:1-6:11  
 1 Cor. 7:1-9:23  
 1 Cor. 10:23-11:1  
 1 Cor. 12:1-14:40  
 1 Cor. 16:1-11

Timothy returns (1 Cor. 16:11) with more bad news. So Paul makes a short and painful interim visit to Corinth (2 Cor. 2:11) and then returns to Ephesus.

Paul sends Titus to Corinth with  
**Letter C.**  
 2 Cor. 2:14-6:13  
 2 Cor. 7:2-4

Paul hears of increased opposition to his ministry and decides to visit Corinth (2 Cor. 2:3-4).

So he sends the "sorrowful"  
**Letter D.**  
 2 Cor. 10:1-13:13

On the way, Titus meets Paul in Macedonia with good news that the situation in Corinth is improving.

Paul sends Titus back with  
**Letter E.**  
 2 Cor. 9:1-15

Paul then prepares to visit Corinth a third time (2 Cor. 12:14), confident that their relationship has improved.

So he sends them the "joyful"  
**Letter F.**  
 2 Cor. 1:1-2:13  
 2 Cor. 7:5-8:24

## CHARISMATIC GIFTS

Charismatic gifts are still debated in churches today. Do we need to authenticate our faith by speaking in tongues or by performing other extraordinary actions?

How might such "spiritual gifts" enrich one's devotional life?

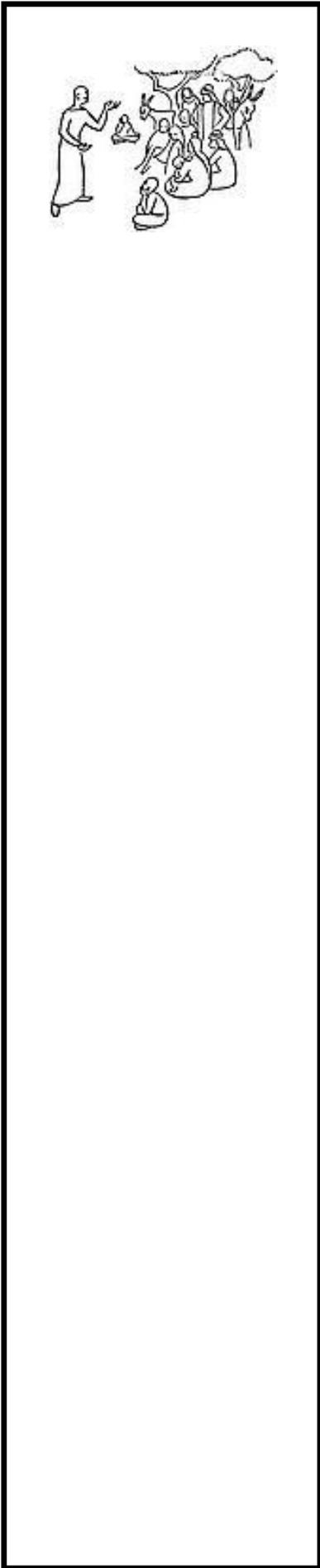
When might they prove disruptive in the community?

## MONETARY OFFERINGS

Paul collected money for the church at Jerusalem. How important are the offerings our religious groups receive?

Do we feel compelled to give money?

Is there any way our contributions can become acts of worship? How about "pledging" and "tithing"?



## GALATIANS FREEDOM FROM LEGALISM

Paul may have written this letter as early as 49 CE, perhaps from Syrian Antioch or even on board ship to Jerusalem, if he was writing to the churches in the southern Roman province of Galatia which he had founded on his earlier missionary journey in 46-48 CE.

Alternatively, the letter may be dated around 54 CE or later if Paul was writing from Ephesus or Macedonia or Corinth to churches in the northern region of Galatia, where he had preached and visited on his later journeys in 49-51 and 52-56 CE.

The chronological problem is complicated by trying to match the book of Acts, which mentions five visits which Paul made to Jerusalem, with Galatians, which mentions only two such visits.

<u>Acts</u>	<u>Galatians</u>
9:26-30	1:18-24
11:30, 12:25	
15:1-35	2:1-10 ?
18:22	
21:17-26	

### ANGER IN THE FACE OF LEGALISM

Apparently the Galatian Christians, all Gentile converts, had accepted Paul's gospel, for it freed them from the petty superstitions and confining class distinctions of their society. But after their initial enthusiasm, they encountered the reality of sinful acts among some of their members.

In Paul's absence other teachers—whether native Galatians or outsiders, whether Jewish Christians or other Gentile converts is not clear—offered a remedy. They insisted that faith in Christ must be supplemented by submitting to the requirements of the Jewish law, especially circumcision.

With definite feelings of anger and frustration Paul attacked this apostasy by defending his apostolic office and by demonstrating that his gospel means absolute freedom from the law. But this does not mean license to live selfishly, as some might have imagined, but freedom to serve one another in love.

### A JUDICIAL DEFENSE OF FREEDOM

Galatians appears to have been written in the rhetorical style of an apologetic letter. It's as though the apostle, although not able to be present in person, were arguing his case in court. Paul, the defendant, states his case to the Galatians, the jury, in the presence of his opponents, the accusers.

The no-nonsense tone of this letter is reflected in a broad assortment of forms: examples from history, citations from scripture, logical arguments, legal terminology, diatribes, sarcastic comments, impassioned appeals, and the like. All reflect Paul's determination to defend not only his apostolic ministry but also his gospel of freedom from the tyranny of law.

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*Prescript (1:1-5)*

- A. *Exordium: Introduction and Theme (1:6-10, 11-12)*
- B. *Narratio: Historical Defense of Paul's Ministry*
1. *The non-apostolic origin of Paul's message (1:13-17)*
  2. *The Judean churches' commendation of Paul (1:18-24)*
  3. *The apostles' acknowledgement of his ministry (2:1-10)*
  4. *Paul's rebuke of Cephas at Antioch (2:11-14)*
- C. *Propositio: Justification by Faith, Not by Works of Law (2:15-21)*
- D. *Probatio: Theological Defense of Paul's Message*
1. *The Galatians' reception of the Spirit (3:1-5)*
  2. *The case of Abraham's faith and blessing (3:6-14)*
  3. *Legal objections to nullifying a will (3:15-18)*
  4. *The temporary place of the law (3:19-25)*
  5. *The experience of baptism into Christ (3:26-29)*
  6. *The believer's position as child and heir (4:1-7)*
  7. *The Galatians' renunciation of idols (4:8-11)*
  8. *An appeal not to return to legal slavery (4:12-20)*
  9. *The allegory of Sarah and Hagar (4:21-31)*
- E. *Exhortatio: Ethical Appeals to Live by the Spirit*
1. *Warning against returning to the law (5:1, 2-12)*
  2. *Freedom to serve one another in love (5:13, 14-24)*  
*lists of fleshly vices and spiritual virtues (5:19-24)*
  3. *Practical examples of a Spirit-led life (5:25-26, 6:1-10)*  
*eschatological exhortation to do good (6:7-10)*

*Postscript (6:11-16)*

*Final Warning and Blessing (6:17-18)*

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## **FAITH ACTIVE IN LOVE**

Modern readers can readily identify with the concerns raised in this letter, namely, the convictions that authentic human existence must be lived in freedom and that legalistic demands rob life of its joy.

Although the specific issue of circumcision is scarcely a burning concern today, we can still appreciate Paul's passion for affirming the possibility of a Spirit-led style of living which allows us to serve others in love.

Even today much religious propaganda suggests that Christ-centered faith must also be supplemented with some other requirement, such as strict morals, in order for us to be sure we are in a right relationship with God.

Paul insists that "works of the law" are unnecessary, even counterproductive, for establishing that relationship. This is a refreshing alternative. It opens up new possibilities for us to embrace an ethic that is centered on God's unconditional acceptance and that is lived out in freely chosen responsibilities.

## **FREE WILL**

Paul insists that Christians are free from the law.

Does he mean merely the Old Testament law of Moses?

Just the Jewish ceremonial traditions?

Or also the ethical principles enshrined in the Ten Commandments?

Could he mean that we are no longer under obligation to *any* law?

And if so, in what sense?

What role does "free will" play in all this?

Are we free to do as we please?

## EPHESIANS SAFE AND SOUND



### SINGLE LIFESTYLES

Ephesians idealizes the unity of the family: husband, wife, children and servants. But what about adults who are not married, or who are divorced or widowed?

Where do single people experience a sense of belonging or the intimacy and support of a caring community?

What should our churches do to avoid excluding single people?

How should single people live in a world which is often impersonal and all too lonely?

Ephesians claims to be from Paul, who was writing from prison. If so, it could be dated in the late 50s or early 60s CE along with Colossians. However strong arguments have been raised against its authenticity: There are no personal references to the Ephesians or to Paul's long ministry there. Much of the language is unique to this letter and not typically Pauline. Many of its teachings seem to be later developments based on Paul's genuine letters. If written by a later Paulinist, perhaps as an anti-Gnostic tract, Ephesians may be dated around 90-100 CE.

Furthermore, the reference to "Ephesians" in the salutation is not in the oldest manuscripts. Thus this letter may have originally been a more general circular epistle meant for all the churches in Asia Minor. In any event, it is apparent that Ephesians was addressed to a church composed primarily of Gentile Christians.

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*Salutation (1:1-2)*

*Benediction of Praise (1:3-14)*

*Prayer of Thanksgiving (1:15-23)*

A. *Doctrinal Recollections: "Talk the Talk"*

1. *The Christians' Salvation (2:1-10)*
2. *Their Incorporation into Christ (2:11-22)*
3. *Paul's Suffering and God's Grace (3:1-13)*
4. *Prayer for Perfection, and a Doxology (3:14-19, 20-21)*

B. *Ethical Exhortations: "Walk the Walk"*

1. *The Unity of the Church (4:1-16)*
2. *Christian Behavior in the Church (4:17-5:20)*
3. *Table of Duties: Behavior in the Household (5:21-6:9)*
4. *Christian Warfare (6:10-20)*

*Personal Remarks: the Visit of Tychicus (6:21-22)*

*Closing Benediction (6:23-24)*

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### TRUTH FOR HOLISTIC LIVING

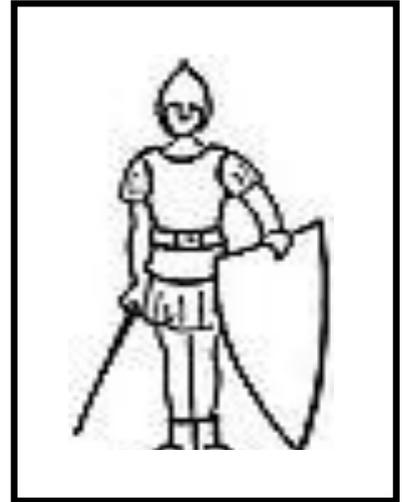
Much of Ephesians displays the nearly poetic language of worship, with baptismal overtones. It stresses the cosmic dimensions of Christ's power, the graciousness of salvation, and the distinctive conduct which should characterize Christian people as they live together in the unity of the church under its God-given leaders.

The epistle offers a holistic perspective of the church and the world designed to enable mature Christians to integrate their faith and life. It reinterprets Paul's theology of the cross for people whose lives are becoming fragmented.

## A MODERN PERSPECTIVE

Modern readers may value this treatise as a device for passing on the community's teachings from an older generation to its younger initiates. It still offers a comprehensive agenda for building a distinctively Christian philosophy of life, but one we need to be evaluated in terms of contemporary issues.

We need to challenge today's pressure to prove one's worth by outperforming others, as well as divisive racial, ethnic, sexual and social issues, by the ideals of divine grace, human community, mutual interdependence and personal responsibility.



## PHILIPPIAN JOY FROM A JAILHOUSE



### PRISONS

Prison conditions in Paul's day must have been strikingly different from modern jails and penitentiaries.

How adequate are modern prisons?

Do we need more humane systems of incarceration?

Do we imprison too many people, or to few?

Do we intend to punish criminals, or reform them, or both?

What role should religious chaplains play within a prison or reformatory?

Paul was in prison when he wrote to his favorite church, which he had founded and revisited. The Philippians in turn had supported their apostle with gifts of money. In this case, their gift had been delivered by Epaphroditus. After Epaphroditus recovered from a near fatal illness, Paul sent him back with this letter of thanks, which repeated a note of joy even though he faced the possibility of execution, and even though other Christian preachers apparently were not unhappy that Paul's work was being suspended. In Philippi as in other areas, the most serious threat to the church came from internal bickering, rather than from outside opposition.

### PRISON CORRESPONDENCE

Like the other "Captivity Epistles," it is debatable whether Philippians should be dated as early as 59-60 CE if Paul was in prison at Ephesus, or as late as 61-63 if he was at Rome. The loose structure of this letter suggests that it may be a conflation of portions of several letters:

- Letter A - A receipt of thanks for the gift . . . . . 4:10-20 [23]
- Letter B - Encouragement for the future . . . . . 1:1-3:1, 4:4-7 4:21-22/23
- Letter C - Warnings about opponents. . . . . 3:2-21, 4:1-3, 4:8-9

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*Salutation (1:1-2)*

*Prayer of Thanksgiving (1:3-11)*

**A. Mutual Encouragement: Paul and the Philippians**

1. *Paul's situation in prison and... (1:12-20)*
2. *...the Philippians' situation under persecution (1:21-30)*
3. *A hymnic appeal for humility (2:1-11)*
4. *An appeal for continued obedience (2:12-18)*
5. *Personal Plans: Timothy & Epaphroditus (2:19-24, 25-30, 3:1)*

**B. Threats to Mutual Joy: Agitation and Quarreling**

1. *Warnings against outside opponents (3:2-16)*
2. *An appeal to remain steadfast (3:17-4:1)*
3. *An appeal to end internal quarreling (4:2-3)*

**C. Miscellaneous Matters**

1. *Appeals for rejoicing and good behavior (4:4-7, 8-9)*
2. *Thanks for the Philippians' generosity (4:10-20)*

*Closing Greetings (4:21-22, 23)*

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### A JOY-FILLED RESPONSE

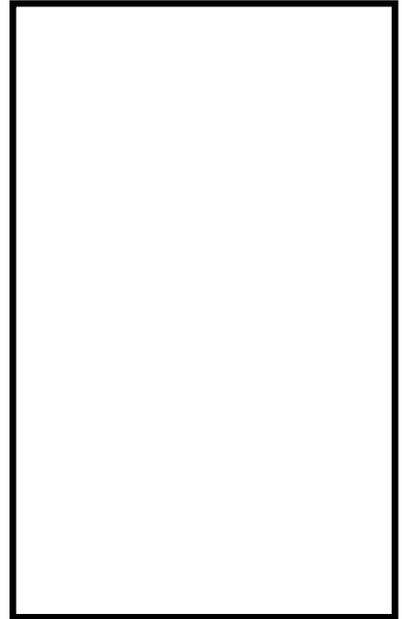
Paul used his own example to encourage the Philippians themselves, for they were beginning to experience severe opposition, perhaps from the Jewish quarter or from newly arrived missionaries. So he warned them not to let outside agitation or internal quarreling break up their unity. He grounded his appeal on the moral obligation which mutual friendship engenders and invited his readers to focus mentally on the example of Christ Jesus, who did not strive to be more than human.

Modern readers who are undergoing personal troubles may still be inspired by this example of joy in the midst of suffering. And we can learn to appreciate what it means to live as authentic human beings by considering the prototype of Christ's self-sacrificing obedience pictured in the hymn-like fragment which undergirds Paul's exhortation (Phil 2:6-11):

Although existing in the form of God,  
he did not regard it as a prize  
to be equal with God;  
rather, he emptied himself  
and took the form of a slave.  
*So being in the likeness of humans*  
and found in shape as a human,  
*he humiliated himself,*  
*and became obedient unto death,*  
*even death on a cross.*

Therefore God also exalted him;  
*and granted him the Name,*  
*the one above every name,*  
that at the name of JESUS  
every knee should bow,  
whether in heaven or upon earth  
or underground,  
and every tongue should  
acknowledge  
that "JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!"  
*to the glory of God the Father.*

(The lines in *italics* are phrases which Paul may have added to the original hymn.)





### NEW AGE PHENOMENA

So-called “new age” religious practices and self-realization techniques—including meditative practices, special diets, horoscopes, crystals, reincarnation, channeling, and similar phenomena—have become more and more popular in recent years.

Are these helpful and liberating approaches for modern men and women?

Are they compatible with traditional religious beliefs?

Are they scientific, or superstitious?

## COLOSSIANS WHO RULES THE ROOST?

Colossians and Philemon both claim to be written by Paul while he was in prison. However, there is considerable doubt whether Paul himself actually wrote Colossians. Its literary style, vocabulary and grammatical syntax diverge sharply from the other Pauline letters. Many of Paul’s basic theological ideas which tend to stress the future eschatological redemption of Christians are replaced by more sacramental concepts which stress salvation as a present possession.

Whether written or dictated by Paul or composed by a close associate, Colossians is obviously rooted in Paul’s thought, which has been adapted to a new situation. The author appropriates spatial language to insist that Christ has absolute, direct and continuing supremacy over all creation and that his people are free from self-humiliating requirements because they enjoy his present rule. If Colossians is not Paul’s own composition, it is still an early letter dating from 65-70 CE.

Colossae, Laodicea and Hieropolis were bunched close together on the Lycus River, about 100 miles inland from Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor. Both Colossians and Philemon purport to be carried by Tychicus to Christians who lived in or around Colossae. These churches had not been founded by Paul himself, but by his associate Epaphras. Apparently their members were mostly Gentile converts, rather than Jewish Christians.

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*Salutation (1:1-2)*

*Thanksgiving (1:3-8)*

*Prayer (1:9-14)*

A. *Doctrinal Discussion: How the Colossians  
“received Christ Jesus as Lord”*

1. *Christ’s lordship over all creation (1:9/15-23)*
2. *Paul’s ministry for the church (1:24-2:5)*  
*Key Verse and Central Thought (2:6-7)*

B. *Ethical Instructions: How to “walk in Christ”*

1. *Warnings against false teachings (2:8-23)*
2. *General ethical injunctions (3:1-17)*
3. *Lists of household duties (3:18-4:1)*
4. *Exhortation to pray (4:2-6)*

*Personal Greetings and Instructions (4:7-17)*

*Concluding Signature (4:18)*

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### A COSMIC CHRIST

Through the ministry of Epaphras the Colossian Christians had become part of the church, the Body of Christ. But the joy of their faith was diminishing because they were falling into an erroneous pattern of behavior. Apparently this error included the mistaken philosophy that the salvation which Jesus offered was not sufficient and that other angelic or astrological powers had to be worshiped and obeyed.

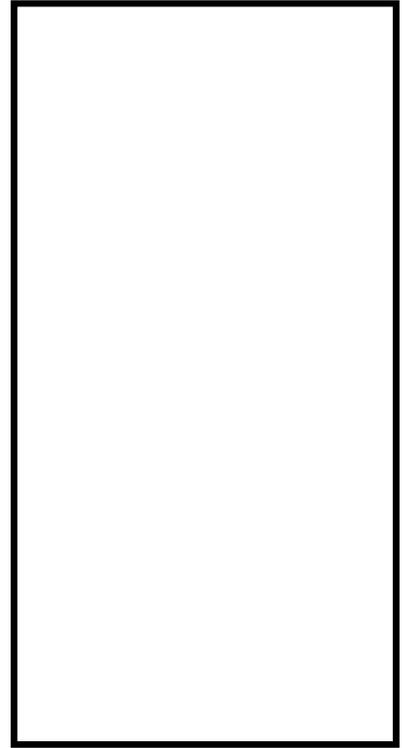
The false teachers in Colossae maintained that God's fullness was distributed through a complex maze of intermediaries, and that believers had to engage in various ascetic practices to gain access to Christ, who stood at the top of a complicated cosmic hierarchy. This was connected with rigid demands to observe all sorts of liturgical and dietary regulations, of the kind popular in some Jewish and mystery-religion circles.

These, however, did little to improve their ethical behavior. A close disciple of Paul, writing in his mentor's name, wrote to correct these errors with a renewed picture of Christ as the one who is head over the universe as well as over the church.

### **RELIGION FOR A NEW AGE**

Throughout the centuries people have repeatedly tried to find encouragement in a world-view that requires adhering to a complex system of rituals and beliefs, as though the universe were a puzzle that needed to be deciphered and negotiated.

Modern readers will need to determine whether Colossians can still help us understand these phenomena and, if so, whether the picture of Christ in this letter helps us escape from the emotional tyranny such thinking can impose.





## SLAVERY

Only 150 years ago many American citizens believed slavery was not only permissible but even sanctioned by God.

It took a civil war to eliminate the practice. And racial prejudices continue into the present time.

Are there other biblically approved biases which need to be challenged today?

How successful has the effort to promote civil rights been in our era?

Do “Black Lives Matter”?

How aware are we of the kinds of slavery which are still tolerated in the modern world?

## PHILEMON TO FREE, OR NOT TO FREE?

Paul’s letter to Philemon—more like a personal note than an epistle—was written while the apostle was in prison. If this was an imprisonment at Ephesus, then its date of composition was 54-55 CE; if at Caesarea, then 56-67; if at Rome, then 58-60.

The letter was carried by Onesimus himself to a Christians who lived in or around Laodicea, bunched together with Colossae and Hieropolis on the Lycus River, about 100 miles inland from Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor. These churches had not been founded by Paul himself, but by his associate Epaphras. Apparently their members were mostly Gentile converts, rather than Jewish Christians.

### APPEAL FOR A SLAVE

Either (a) Philemon’s slave Onesimus had run from his master and found his way to Paul, or (b) he had been loaned to Paul to assist him during his imprisonment. In either event Paul apparently converted him and sent him back with this letter to his owner, who was a Christian.

This letter contains the apostle’s request either (a) that Philemon would receive the runaway as a brother without punishing him, or (b) that he would give the slave his freedom, perhaps so that he could rejoin the apostle as an evangelist. This gives a glimpse into the potential impact which Christian mores could have on such sensitive legal and social institutions as slavery.

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*Salutation (vv. 1-3)*

1. *Paul’s Thanksgiving because of Philemon (vv. 4-7)*
  2. *Paul’s Request on behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8-22)*
- Concluding Greetings and Blessing (vv. 23-24, 25)*
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### A TACTFUL APPROACH

The question of our own personal freedom and how we help others gain that liberation can be measured against Paul’s efforts on behalf of his friend Onesimus. An elaborate word-play on Onesimus’ name (which means “handy” or “useful,” vv. 10, 11, 20), references to Paul’s “heart” (vv. 7, 12, 20) and to the “refreshment” (vv. 7, 20) he hopes to experience, as well as repeated reminders of his “imprisonment” (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23), underlie his message.

As a result, the letter to Philemon is a model of tact and self-abnegation, in which the apostle refuses to insist on his own rights. Instead he appeals to his friend’s appreciation of the Gospel, trusting that he will make the best decision.

His approach is a concrete example for us of a technique which has the potential to transform human society in Christ’s image. When we chooses to emphasize the positive qualities in other people and to give them the opportunity to express them in whatever way would, that will give us all the greatest benefit for everyone involved.

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## 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE END TIME

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians early in his career, from Corinth in 50-51 CE, probably not many weeks after he, Timothy and Silvanus had left the church in Thessalonica. Apparently they had ministered for several months in the administrative seat and chief seaport of Macedonia, first in the Jewish synagogue and later among the Gentile populace, and had founded a congregation composed primarily of pagan converts.

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE LETTERS

The style and contents of these two letters make their relationship unclear. Many scholars consider it unlikely that Paul actually wrote 2 Thessalonians. If he did, it is debatable whether 1 Thessalonians was actually written before 2 Thessalonians, and whether a shorter or longer time elapsed between their writing.

Some have suggested that the two letters may have been compiled by later editors from portions of several letters, perhaps as follows:

- Letter A — 1 Thess. 2:13-4:1/2
- Letter B — 1 Thess. 1:1-2:12, 4:2/3-5:28
- Letter C — 2 Thess. 1:1-12, 3:6-16
- Letter D — 2 Thess. 2:13-14, 2:1-12, 2:15-3:5, 3:17-18

### DEATH AND GRIEVING

When someone close to us dies, we have to work at mourning that loss; we have to experience the stages of grief which will bring us to wholeness again.

What can we say to each other that will help us grieve?

What words will serve to comfort, and will not sound trite and forced?

What kind of hope can we offer?

### *Salutation & Thanksgiving (1:1, 2-10)*

### 1 THESSALONIANS

- A. *The Interaction of Paul and the Thessalonians*
    - 1. *Paul's Ministry among the Thessalonians (2:1-12)*
    - 2. *The Thessalonians' Response to Paul (2:13-16)*
    - 3. *Paul's Desire to Visit Again (2:17-20)*
    - 4. *Timothy's Visit to the Thessalonians (3:1-5)*
    - 5. *Timothy's Report to Paul (3:6-10)*
    - 6. *Prayer and Blessing (3:11-13)*
  - B. *Paranetic Instructions to the Thessalonians*
    - 1. *Exhortation to Avoid Immorality (4:1-8)*
    - 2. *Instruction about Brotherly Love (4:9-12)*
    - 3. *Instruction about the Dead and the Parousia (4:13-18)*
    - 4. *Instruction about Dates and Times (5:1-11)*
    - 5. *Miscellaneous Exhortations for Community Life (5:12-22)*
    - 6. *Prayer and Blessing (5:23-24)*
- Closing Autograph & Blessing (5:25-27, 28)*

### 1 THESSALONIANS: A PROBLEM OF DYING

The Christians at Thessalonica had suffered some of the same opposition which Paul had encountered, and in the interval some of them had died. Paul wrote to encourage them by strengthening their ties to himself, to give them hope by reminding them of the return of the Lord, and to answer some concerns they had sent via Timothy.

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*Salutation & Thanksgiving (1:1-2, 3-10)*

## 2 THESSALONIANS

*Prayer (1:11-12)*

A. *Doctrinal Discussion about the Parousia*

1. *The Coming of the Lawless One (2:1-12)*
2. *The Assurance of the Thessalonians' Salvation (2:13-15)*
3. *Prayer and Blessing (2:16-17)*

B. *Paranetic Instructions for the Thessalonians*

1. *Request for Mutual Encouragement (3:1-5)*
2. *Command to Discipline Idle Brothers (3:6-12)*
3. *Miscellaneous Instructions (3:13-15)*
4. *Prayer and Blessing (3:16)*

*Closing Signature & Blessing (3:17-18)*

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### 2 THESSALONIANS: A PROBLEM OF LIVING

The Thessalonians had become confused about some of the details of the Lord's return, perhaps because of a spurious letter. Furthermore, their persecutions seem to have become more severe. The Pauline author wrote to strengthen their steadfastness, to correct the notion that the Day of the Lord had already arrived, and to advise the church to discipline any lazy and disruptive members.

### A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE FUTURE

The recurring prediction that "the End of the World" might occur within the present generation has a fascinating hold on some religious people today. But for most modern men and women this pessimistic idea seems at best antiquarian and at worst a self-fulfilling prophecy of nuclear annihilation or ecological disasters.

The Thessalonian correspondence, however, has a more realistic outlook. It is true that world history is moving toward an end and that end is part of the divine plan. Therefore, our prospects for the future need not be pessimistic; rather, we can dare to be hopeful.

As contemporary readers, we can learn to appreciate that hopeful attitude and to regain a sense of community. For Paul stressed the need for all members of the community to fulfill their responsibilities toward each other. This combination of comfort and exhortation is still a realistic approach for us as we look toward the future, whether the future will end in our own personal death or ultimately in the dissolution of the entire cosmos.

### CAREER CHOICES

The apostle told some of the Thessalonians to keep on working.

But how should we choose our careers?

Is salary the most important factor?

What about our opportunities to serve others?

How should we treat those who are unemployed?

Or the under-employed?

Does the debate about minimum wages come into play here?



## ORGANIZED RELIGION

The Pastoral Epistles come from a time when the early church was becoming more and more organized.

Christians were beginning to develop a system of bishops and elders and deacons.

Is such organization healthy for the life of the church? Is it necessary?

How do today's ecclesiastical organizations help the cause of the gospel?

How do they stifle Christian ministry?

## 1 & 2 TIMOTHY AND TITUS SUGGESTION FOR NEOPHYTES

The so-called Pastoral Epistles purport to be written by Paul to his younger associates Timothy and Titus in order to encourage them in their work as pastors. However, several factors suggest that the Pastorals are pseudonymous, not written by Paul:

- Their vocabulary and literary style are similar to the later Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists.
- Their historical situations cannot be fitted into the story of Paul's life as deduced from the other letters and the book of Acts.
- Their teachings, the heresies they combat, and their views of church organization reflect later second century situations.

If these were genuine letters from Paul, they would have to be dated after his release from prison in Rome. 1 Timothy and Titus would then have been written around 63-65 CE from Macedonia. 2 Timothy would be dated even later, during a second imprisonment at Rome which would have ended in Paul's martyrdom.

In reality they must be dated after 100 CE, after the apostolic age, when a later church leader who stood in Paul's tradition wanted to strengthen the churches during their internal and external struggles. Rather than being read in context with Paul's genuine letters, they may better be read as a continuation of his story as told in the book of Acts.

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### *Salutation (1:1-2)*

### 1 TIMOTHY

#### A. *Directions for Ministry at Ephesus*

1. *Admonition to oppose false teachers (1:3-11)*
2. *An apostolic thanksgiving (1:12-17)*

#### B. *More Directions for Ministry*

1. *Charge to Timothy (1:18-20)*
2. *concerning prayers (2:1-8)*
3. *regarding women (2:8-15)*
4. *regarding bishops (3:1-7)*
5. *regarding deacons (3:8-13)*
6. *Personal plans (3:14-16)*

#### C. *Still More Directions for Ministry*

1. *Encouragement in the face of false teachers (4:1-10)*
2. *Department of a young minister (4:11-5:2)*
3. *regarding widows (5:3-16)*
4. *regarding elders (5:17-19)*
5. *regarding sinners (5:20-24)*
6. *regarding slaves (6:1-2)*
7. *Encouragement in the face of mercenary false teachers (6:3-16)*

#### D. *Concluding Advice*

1. *regarding the rich (6:17-19)*
  2. *Closing greeting and blessing (6:20-21)*
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*Salutation (1:1-4)*

**TITUS**

A. *Directions for Ministry on Crete*

1. *Appointment of elders and bishops (1:5-9)*
2. *Avoiding false teachers (1:10-16)*
3. *Fitting behavior for church members (2:1-10)*
4. *Confession of faith (2:11-14)*

B. *More Directions for Ministry*

1. *Obeying authorities (2:15-3:2)*
2. *Confession of faith (3:3-8)*
3. *Good behavior (3:8-11)*
4. *Personal instructions (3:12-14)*

*Closing Greeting and Blessing (3:15)*

*Salutation (1:1-2)*

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*Thanksgiving and Apostolic Encouragement (1:3-14)*

**2 TIMOTHY**

A. *The Apostle's Final Advice*

1. *Paul's fate in prison at Rome (1:15-18)*
2. *Admonition to endure suffering for Christ (2:1-13)*
3. *Admonition to avoid disputes with false teachers (2:14-26)*

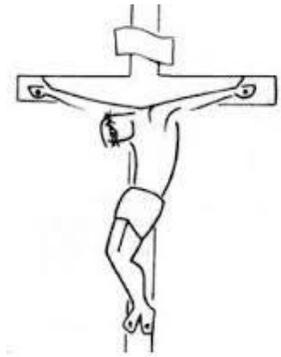
B. *More Apostolic Encouragement*

1. *Prediction of End Time defections (3:1-9)*
2. *The example of Paul's own endurance (3:10-13)*
3. *Encouragement to remain faithful to true teaching (3:14-4:4)*
4. *Encouragement to endure to the End (4:5-8)*

*Personal Instructions (4:9-18)*

*Closing Greeting and Blessing (4:19-21 & 22)*

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## **ESTABLISHING SELF-IDENTITY**

The Pastoral letters reflect a situation in which the church's self-identity was being threatened from two directions:

- From the inside heretical teachings led to overly-strict or extra-loose behavior.
- On the outside the church's relations with the pagan world were deteriorating.

The proposed solutions were also two-fold:

- The church must remain firm in its orthodox teaching and in its loyalty to duly-appointed leaders.
- Also, Christians must lead the kind of lives which could give no offense to those outside in the world.

The Pauline tradition enshrined in these letters enables their auditors to use the church's apostolic teaching in a way that would reach all the way back to the figure of Jesus as their living Lord.

As modern readers, we will need to determine whether we continue to be part of this unending process, whether the church's doctrine still enables us to cope in a faith-filled way with the struggles of everyday living in a secular world. It may be that an authentic Christian witness would require us to offend against prevailing cultural norms.

Furthermore, we may want to ask whether the church's pastoral office still reflects the ideal portrait painted in these letters and whether that picture offers a realistic agenda for ministry in modern society.