
Exegesis 23: The Challenge of Communication (2 Timothy 4:1-8)

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In this portion of 2 Timothy, we find Paul is writing to his younger colleague, knowing that his ministry is fast drawing to a close. Having begun an extended appeal to Timothy in 1:6, he draws it to a conclusion with a change of tone. Picking up Paul's metaphor from verse 7, Oden nicely sums up the importance of this:

Timothy's race remains yet ahead, even as Paul's is completing. The baton is passed from one runner to another. As the letter nears its end, Paul's life is drawing towards its end. Second Timothy chapter four is the last passing of the baton – not only Paul's last opportunity to instruct and charge Timothy but the historic Christian community as a whole. It is the last instruction by a dying man to his beloved "son" to whom the whole enterprise of his life is now being turned over.¹

We are therefore privileged to read very personal and heartfelt, yet far-reaching, instructions from the great missionary theologian.

Structure

Though several commentators treat vv. 1-5 and vv. 6-8 as distinct units, there are distinct advantages in treating the whole of vv. 1-8 as a single unit of thought. There are three reasons for this decision. Firstly, there is an *inclusio*² formed by verses 1 and 8, where there is a clear conceptual parallel in the expectation of the coming judge, and even an exact verbal parallel in the Greek phrase *ten epiphaneian autou*. Secondly, there is a clear symmetry to the passage as a whole, as the imperatives of verses 2 and (especially) 5 are balanced by the indicatives in Paul's account of his own ministry which is presented as a pattern for Timothy to follow.³ Thirdly, there is an explicit grammatical connection between verses 5 and 6 by means of *gar* in v. 6. The decision to treat these verses as a whole is not simply a matter of convenience. Commenting of the first five verses, Gordon Fee states that,

Since this charge is grammatically tied to verses 6-8...those verses will give us the clue to much of this section.⁴

According to this view, we can present Paul's thought as follows:⁵

A. Eschatological

Prologue (1)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom,

B. The Charge (2)

I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

- C. The Rationale (3&4) For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.
- D. Personal Charge to Faithfulness (5) As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.
- E. Personal Testimony of Faithfulness (6&7) As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
- F. Eschatological Conclusion (8) From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

A. Eschatological prologue

The solemnity of Paul's words is established in two ways. Firstly, he draws attention to the reality of being in the presence "of God and Christ Jesus". This form of words is common in Paul, reflecting his "Christological monotheism"⁶ whereby he can speak of Jesus Christ in the same terms as God, yet maintain a clear commitment to the monotheism expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4-6.⁷

Secondly, he develops his reference to Christ Jesus to identify him as the eschatological judge. It is a distinctive element of Paul's theology that he develops the OT concept of the Day of the Lord (*YOM YAHWEH*; cf. Amos, particularly chapters 5 and 8) into the Day of Christ Jesus.⁸ The theme of judgement is of great significance to Paul. Here it would seem that Christ's role as judge is identified for two reasons. Firstly, Timothy's faithfulness to his calling here expressed will not be assessed by Paul but by Jesus Christ himself. Secondly, the reference to Jesus Christ as the judge of *all* people⁹ indicates that Paul intends this to be a factor in Timothy's thinking about his ministry. G Knight draws attention to a similar thought elsewhere in Paul's letters,

Just as the thought of the judgment by Christ of all people motivated Paul (2 Cor. 5:9-11), so Paul wanted it to motivate Timothy.¹⁰

We can say, then, that a true understanding of the pastor's calling requires a well developed eschatology. If the realities of the future return of Jesus Christ and his role as judge of the living and the dead are not firmly held and thoroughly integrated into the broader theological position, it is unlikely that the contemporary pastor will fulfil the charge given to Timothy in the way Paul intended.¹¹

Paul's next phrase develops what he has just said, but also provides a distinct foundation for the charge. The Greek is "rough"¹² here, but there is a general consensus that the unexpected use of the accusative is that "used with swearing or adjuring",¹³ which reinforces the solemnity of Paul's words in one more way.

Paul's focus on Jesus' role as judge is, in this case, closely related to the "appearing" (*epiphaneia*) of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The term *epiphaneia*, according to Ridderbos, is mainly used to speak of Jesus' appearance as triumphant king:

Although epiphany, otherwise than parousia, does once allude to Christ's first coming (2 Tim 1:10), it is generally employed exclusively for Christ's definitive coming in glory. The word was particularly suited for this purpose because in the Hellenistic world it had acquired the additional significance of a solemn, glorious appearance or entrance, as, for example, of the Hellenistic rulers.¹⁵

The *epiphaneia* is closely linked with the *basileia* – the kingdom. Although it is universally acknowledged that the proclamation of "the kingdom of God" was at the heart of Jesus' ministry, Paul makes very few references to the theme. This suggests that Paul was at least familiar with the words of Jesus, and to some it forms part of a body of evidence which suggests that he took such "Jesus tradition" very seriously indeed.¹⁶ Even more interesting is that Paul speaks of "*his* kingdom" which in context is quite clearly a reference to Christ Jesus. This reference to Christ's role as king serves as a conceptual parallel with the later use of *kurios* ("Lord").

B. The charge

Paul articulates what he is in fact doing: "I solemnly urge you". The Greek compound word *diamarturomai* here bears the sense of "to be emphatic in stating an opinion or desire – 'to insist'".¹⁷ The first person ("I") adds a sense of both the personal relationship that exists between Paul and his young friend, and the apostolic authority with which Paul issues this charge. Guthrie comments that,

The solemnity of the present charge is doubly impressive as the parting advice of the aged warrior to his younger and rather timid lieutenant. It would be emptied of much of its meaning and dignity if it were no more than a fictitious attempt to represent what the real Paul might have said to the real Timothy.¹⁸

The form of words used here bears a striking resemblance to 1 Timothy 5:21.¹⁹ The actual content of the charge is expressed with dramatic conciseness, as Paul makes his points by means of a series of aorist imperatives. It is interesting to note that they all relate to communication.

The first imperative sets the tone for what follows.²⁰ Timothy is to "preach the word". It is well known that the verb *keruxon* is related to the noun *kerux* meaning "herald" and so indicates public proclamation. In the pastoral epistles, Paul uses the full term *logos tou theou* to refer to the *gospel*, the "good news".²¹ What is the force of the aorist imperative? As D Wallace points out, it is hardly ingressive ("begin to preach the word"), but rather what Wallace describes as "constative", defined as,

a solemn or categorical command. The stress is *not* "begin an action," nor "continue to act." Rather the stress is on the *solemnity* and *urgency* of the action; thus "I solemnly charge you to act – and do it now!"²²

Thus, the grammatical construction of Paul's imperatives serves, once again, to reinforce the solemnity of the charge already expressed in verse 1. The priority of the

first imperative is highlighted by its development by means of a second imperative (*epistethi*, meaning “stand by” or “be ready”) plus a qualifying phrase composed of two short adverbs with a similar sound, *eukairos* and *akairois*. Paul is fond of various forms of word play including alliteration and, as here, assonance. However, it is regularly the case that the more subtle the creativity of the language, the more difficult it is to have precise expression. Here Paul’s famous phrase is not as clear as we might wish. Fee points out that they might be understood with reference to Timothy (subjective) or to his hearers (objective), tending towards the latter in view of the content of verses 3 and 4.²³ Thus we might paraphrase Paul, “whether they like it or not”!

This overarching imperative is followed up with three further aspects of the work Paul is calling Timothy to carry out. While Kelly draws attention to the possibility of analysing Paul’s words finely for homiletical purposes, he is probably right to restrain himself since Paul often multiplies words more for impact than for subtle nuances in meaning.²⁴ The terms might be translated “refute, rebuke and exhort” (Kelly) or “rebuke, warn and urge” (Fee). What is notable is that all three refer to verbal communication, mostly of a corrective nature. Several translations prefer “encourage” as a translation for the final imperative *parakaleson*, probably because of its more positive ring, but commentators are agreed that a more robust term is required. However, the final phrase “with the utmost patience in teaching” balances the more negative tone of the preceding imperatives, and should be understood to qualify each one of them, not simply the last.²⁵ The faithful pastor is not called simply to deliver words into space but to *communicate*. This is a much more difficult task as it involves close interaction with people, many of whom may not appear to wish your communication. This takes patience of a kind that only the Lord’s grace can bring about, and here Paul just hints at the reasons why the pastor’s character is more significant in the New Testament than his qualifications.

C. The rationale

The connective particle *gar* (“for”) indicates the direct relationship between Paul’s imperatives and the words that follow now. Paul will explain that the insistence of his words is not overstatement, but reflects the sad situation in which the young preacher will find himself.

What is rejected is “healthy” teaching. The truth that brings health is not received by all for what it is. This apparent absurdity of people rejecting what will change their lives for the better recalls the first chapter of 1 Corinthians where Paul describes those who reject true wisdom as foolishness. The motivation is to serve their own desires (*epithumiai*), and in that cause they gather “teachers” (*didaskaloi*, plural) so as to have a variety of opinions to suit a variety of circumstances. In a wonderful image which is both endearing and chilling at once, Paul describes these people as “being tickled in their hearing” (Kelly).

Paul pursues the theme by indicating the element of deliberate rebellion against God with the active verb *apostrepsousin* (“they will turn away”²⁶) used in relation to the truth. This echoes Romans 1:18 where Paul describes those who, though knowing the truth, “suppress the truth in unrighteousness”. Of course, turning *from* truth never comes alone,²⁷ and these rebels turn *towards* “myths”. The way we hear the word

“myth” can never be quite the same again after Bultmann’s programme of “demythologizing”.²⁸ However, despite all the modern literary nuances of the term, its sense here, as always in the New Testament, is simply “that which is false”.²⁹

D. Personal charge to faithfulness

Paul’s use of the singular second person pronoun (*su*) places verse 5 at the fulcrum of a two-fold contrast. Firstly, he is drawing a contrast between the foolish and fluctuating desires of those described in verses 3 and 4, and the firmly grounded stand required of Timothy. Secondly, and more obvious at the level of syntax, Paul uses the first person pronoun (*ego*) in verse 6 to contrast his completed ministry with that of Timothy which is here set before him in terms of opportunity and potential.

The call this time comes by a verb with the root meaning “to be sober”, and the more extended meaning “to be self-controlled”. This is a requirement in every conceivable situation, so that it could be said that Timothy can never be “off duty”. The second imperative is ominous: “bear hardship patiently”.³⁰ Though the term is not frequently used in the New Testament, the prospect of hardship should be no surprise to any follower of Jesus on the basis of both teaching and example. The character that shows itself in such times will communicate a message to others with startling clarity. Thirdly, Timothy is to “do the work of an evangelist”. The noun “evangelist” is uncommon in the New Testament,³¹ and it raises the question of whether this was an “office” or whether it simply reflected characteristic behaviour. Finally, Timothy is told, “fulfil your ministry”. It is striking that this summary statement includes a term that emphasises service. The pastor is to be a servant, following the pattern of Jesus Christ the Lord (John 13; Philippians 2), and that should be a distinctive mark of what he does.

Each of these imperatives indicates that a high degree of commitment is required of Timothy, and therefore of anyone who would follow in his footsteps. There is a strong indication that the way will be hard. But in these very hardships, the pastor is called to demonstrate the character of Jesus Christ as he lives out servanthood.

E. Personal testimony of faithfulness

The pronoun *ego* is extremely emphatic, not only due to its presence but also due to its position as the first word of the sentence. A sharp contrast is being drawn here, and yet the presence of *gar* (“for”) relates this section very closely to what has come before.

Paul describes himself in language which recalls the libation poured out on the altar.³² Knight thinks that the allusion is “to the pouring out of his blood in martyrdom”,³³ and it is certainly the case that Paul is referring to his death, as the following parallel statement regarding his “departure”³⁴ makes clear. The use of *ede* (“already”) indicates Paul’s certainty of the event. It is not, however, entirely clear whether Knight intends a strong parallel between the pouring of the offering and the pouring of Paul’s blood. If that is what he intends then he is probably pressing the metaphor too far. This metaphor would have been entirely appropriate even if Paul’s death had involved no bloodshed, and Fee takes a more nuanced position when he writes,

The metaphor implies that *the whole present ordeal*, culminating in death, is a libation unto the Lord.³⁵

Paul's matter-of-fact analysis of his present situation stems from a satisfaction that he has fulfilled his calling. We must surely regard the indicatives in Paul's favourite athletic imagery as *implicit* imperatives directed to Timothy: *you* fight the good fight,³⁶ *you* finish the race, *you* keep the faith.

F. Eschatological conclusion

In concluding his reflections on his ministry, Paul's mind moves to what awaits him. The *stephanos* ("victory garland") which Paul looks forward to is qualified by the genitive phrase "of righteousness". While the *dik*-word group would most naturally be translated as "righteousness" or some cognate term, here perhaps it carries the sense of "vindication".³⁷ Though Knight argues for a more familiar exegetical rendering of the phrase ("the wreath *which is* righteousness"),³⁸ there is good reason for following Stott. What is particularly interesting about Paul's confidence is that it is rooted in his present experience. He grasps the hope of what will be as a present reality, since, for Paul, hope is not wishful thinking but certainty based on promises by the one who is faithful.³⁹

The Lord (*kurios*) is not previously mentioned or identified. It is one of Paul's most characteristic terms of reference for Jesus.⁴⁰ However, the references to "the righteous judge" and "his appearing" send the reader back to verse 1 where there is no question that Christ Jesus is the referent of these terms. That the judge is "righteous" is in keeping both with the testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Gen 18:25; Psalm 7:11; Zeph 3:5) and with the character of the garland which he will award to Paul. That the award will be made on "that day" is an allusion to the *YOM YAHWEH* motif discussed earlier. It also indicates that the award is not associated with the death of a believer but with the final declaration of Jesus' Lordship when the dead in Christ will be raised and, together with those who are still alive, will be changed and receive new bodies (cf. v. 1).

This eschatological emphasis draws the present section to a close by demonstrating that Paul lived his life in the light of future hope, but the little phrase "and not only to me" broadens the focus from his joyful expectation to the opportunity for all the faithful servants of the Lord to know that same wonderful experience. Fee comments,

With this final phrase Paul redirects his concern back to Timothy. Just as he was charged in verse 1 to fulfil his ministry in light of the great Christian eschatological realities, so now he is encouraged that the prize, too, shall be his and to all who have longed for his appearing.⁴¹

It is surely a great pattern for a pastor that when Paul is captivated by the thought of meeting the Lord face to face (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and receiving his prize (cf. Phil 3:14), he does not hold that prospect selfishly to himself but opens it out before his colleague, and indeed to all who now read his letter, as a motivation to faithfulness.⁴² There is no indication that Paul regarded this anticipation of receiving his prize as an impure motive for service. Rather, he set his mind on it and strove to reach it. The weary pastor will no doubt find new resources if he dwells for a while on the wonder of the prospect of being with the Lord always, but he will know even more satisfaction if he shares that hope with his colleagues and fellow believers so that all may run for the prize together.

Conclusion

Paul's charge to Timothy brings before every believer, but particularly every pastor, a call to communicate the message of "good news" in a context which may be far from receptive. The reaction of the audience, however, is not the pastor's business. The pastor is to treat the people with patience, and with all the skill he has been gifted with, to teach them clearly, keeping in mind the great eschatological drama within which he is ministering. Paul's charge to Timothy brings before those who are called to teach the reality that we cannot do so without the support of a colleague in the Lord. Let us encourage one another to faithfulness as Paul did for Timothy.

References

- ¹ TC Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Interpretation; Louisville: W/JKP, 1989), p. 134-5.
- ² A literary device by which a unit of thought is identified by the use of parallel words, phrases or ideas at the beginning and end of the unit.
- ³ Paul's use of "pattern" as a motivation to discipleship is seen particularly clearly in Philippians, where Jesus Christ, Timothy and Epaphroditus, and Paul himself are all set before the Philippians as patterns to follow. See further PT O'Brien, "The Gospel and Godly Models in Philippians" in Wilkins and Paige (eds) *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (RP Martin FS; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 273-84.
- ⁴ GD Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 283.
- ⁵ English translation is normally from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.
- ⁶ The term is NT Wright's. See his *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).
- ⁷ James Dunn has a useful discussion of this subject in his massive volume, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 252-55.
- ⁸ See especially LJ Kreitzer, *Jesus and God in Paul's Eschatology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) for discussion of the evidence for this in other portions of the Pauline corpus, and *idem*. "Eschatology" in G Hawthorne et al (eds) *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: IVP, 1993) 253-69. Also H Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 551-2.
- ⁹ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* p. 284, notes the way in which the phrase "who will judge the living and the dead" is found in the Apostolic Fathers with the character of "a semicreedal formula".
- ¹⁰ GW Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 452.
- ¹¹ For a valuable contemporary treatment of eschatology, see Brower and Elliot (eds) *The Reader Must Understand* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), and especially the essay in that volume by Greg K Beale, "The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology", p. 11-52.
- ¹² So Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 284.
- ¹³ So Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* 452. Cf. BDF p. 149; DB Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 204-5.
- ¹⁴ This particular term is distinctive (though not unique, 2 Thess. 2:8) of the Pastoral Epistles. See 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; Tit. 2:13 in addition to the two occurrences in the present passage. See the discussion in NIDNTT, p. 3:317-320.
- ¹⁵ Ridderbos, p. *Paul* 529-30. Cf. the dark irony of the self-application of term by Antiochus IV, 1 Maccabees 1:10: "From them came forth a sinful root, Antiochus Epiphanes, son of King Antiochus; he had been a hostage in Rome. He began to reign in the one hundred thirty-seventh year of the kingdom of the Greeks." See NIDNTT 3:318 for example of use with reference to Caesar.
- ¹⁶ See Dunn's discussion in *Theology of Paul*, p. 190-91. On Paul's knowledge of the life and

- teaching of Jesus, see David Wenham, "The Story of Jesus Known to Paul" in Green and Turner (eds) *Jesus of Nazareth – Lord and Christ* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), p. 197-311, and more fully, *idem* D Wenham, *Paul: Founder of Christianity or Follower of Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
- ¹⁷ JP Louw and EA Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 1988-9) s.v. Compare its use in Acts 2:40.
- ¹⁸ D Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1957), p. 165.
- ¹⁹ Compare also 1 Timothy 6:13.
- ²⁰ So Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 284.
- ²¹ See Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 284.
- ²² Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 720-1.
- ²³ Fee *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* 285. So also Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 454-5.
- ²⁴ JND Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1963), p. 206
- ²⁵ So correctly, Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 206.
- ²⁶ Knight comments that the verb "strongly implies that they once professed to hold to the truth that they 'will turn away from,' just as its usage in 1:15 implied a prior relationship" (*The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 456).
- ²⁷ The *men...de* construction indicates a balanced statement of two contrasting parts.
- ²⁸ See especially his famous essay, "New Testament and Mythology" in HW Bartsch (ed.) *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1953), also conveniently found in S Ogden (ed. and trans.) *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (London: SCM, 1985), p. 1-43.
- ²⁹ See NIDNTT, p. 2:643-7. In this article, FF Bruce comments, "In NT *mythos* is found only in the Pastoral Epistles and 2 Peter, and always in a disparaging sense...The context of the Pastorals, however, suggests a Jewish element in these myths", 2:644-5.
- ³⁰ So Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 457.
- ³¹ Found elsewhere only in Eph. 4:11 and Acts 21:28.
- ³² Numbers 15:5,7,10. See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 458, on *spendomai*. Also, NIDNTT, 2:855.
- ³³ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 458.
- ³⁴ See Louw-Nida's lexicon, s.v. *analysis*: "a figurative extension of meaning of *analysis* 'loosing' 'releasing'".
- ³⁵ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 289. Emphasis added.
- ³⁶ Cf. 1 Timothy 6:12.
- ³⁷ So Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Leicester: IVP, 1973), p. 115;
- ³⁸ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 461.
- ³⁹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:3. This thought is expressed most clearly by another anonymous author in Hebrews 10:23: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful". See NIDNTT 2:238-46, and more briefly Hawthorne et. al. (eds) *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, p. 415-17.
- ⁴⁰ Second only to "Christ" in frequency. See Hawthorne et al (eds) *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, p. 560-69. NIDNTT, p. 2:510-20.
- ⁴¹ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 290.
- ⁴² See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 462, on legitimacy of "have longed for" as translation of the perfect tense of *agapao* (usually translated as "I love"). He directs the reader to BAGD for further reference.

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