

A Pastoral Appeal for Sanity

I've never been fond of the Pastoral Epistles – that is, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. These are the three New Testament letters – supposedly (but not conclusively) written by Paul – that were addressed to church leaders rather than to whole congregations. And I've never liked them.

For starters, some of the most head-scratchingly offensive passages in the whole New Testament are found in these books. In 1 Timothy, for instance, we read that women must submit and learn in silence and never have any authority over men because sin was all women's fault in the first place, and the way for women to be saved is to do their job and have babies (1 Timothy 2:11-15, Morris Paraphrase Version). It would take too long to list all the ways that this passage contradicts not only the rest of the Bible but also basic human intelligence.

Even beyond such eye-roll-worthy passages, the tone of the Pastoral Epistles is just less attractive than that of other New Testament letters. Paul proposes daring, creative new theological constructs for the energetic movement he was involved in. But the Pastoral Epistles are not daring or innovative. They slam on the brakes and say, "Not so fast!" Paul proposes radical new approaches to ethics. The Pastoral Epistles affirm traditional moral teachings. Paul talks about "Faith," by which he means radical trust in God's grace. The Pastoral Epistles talk about "The Faith," by which they mean the established teachings of the church. The Pastorals, I've always felt, were legalistic, stodgy, small-minded, and dull compared to the rest of the New Testament.

So it was a bit of a surprise when I began planning my sermons for this fall to find, over and over again, that the theme I was developing was dealt with thoughtfully in these three short books. In September, I want us to think together about the divided nature of Christianity today – the way that in so many ways our faith appears to be split into two irreconcilable camps that have nothing in common except that they both make Christianity look bad.

Some Christians say the Bible is inerrant in every way, including scientifically; others seem to have forgotten that the Bible exists. Some Christians have a strict moral code that they'd like to impose on everyone; others seem to think that whatever feels right is probably fine. And so on, in area after area. Christianity too often has been defined in the eyes of the world by the lunatics on both sides. Is there another way? Is there a middle path? Is there a way to stand for something without standing on the toes of everyone else? Are Arrogant Jerk and Colorless Wimp the only choices for Christians now?

And the Pastoral Epistles seem to offer that middle way. I'm still not keen on their approach to women, but these books deal with churches in conflict, quarrels over doctrine, and spats over morality. They aren't inventing the church, as the first Apostles and Paul did; they're just trying to make it work. And in that goal, maybe a little dull old common sense is worth looking at after all.