

had vanquished them decisively through the humiliation of the Cross, and now He was handling the cleanup through the prayers and love works of this very community of humans.

Farewells

1 and 2 Timothy, Titus

Nero's Pogrom

Luke's book of Acts ended with Paul spending two years in Rome under house arrest, awaiting trial. What happened then? Was Paul convicted of anti-Roman agitation and executed? Or was he acquitted and allowed to pursue his plans, either westward to Spain or back east to his current communities?

We don't know. Tradition has it that he was acquitted in AD 62 but rearrested and executed two to five years later in a general persecution of Christians. In AD 64, a fire broke out in Rome, raged for five days, completely consumed three of the city's fourteen districts (including the imperial palace), and ravaged seven others. Emperor Nero worked overtime to help the homeless, but rumors flew that he had arranged arson in order to rebuild the city to his taste. (It was true that the reconstruction he financed was far more elegantly planned than the old irregular blocks of tenements, but the new approach was partly aimed at fire prevention.)

As the whispers grew louder, Nero became desperate for scapegoats. He fastened on a controversial sect: the Christians. Some said they were cannibals (they supposedly ate somebody's

flesh and blood in a secret rite). They were certainly atheists and antisocial, for they refused to worship the Roman gods or participate in public functions, calling them debauched and idolatrous.

So the Christians were charged with arson, and anyone fingered as a member of the sect was rounded up. "A huge crowd" of those who admitted being followers of Christ were convicted, as a Roman writer put it a few decades later, "not so much of arson as of hatred of the human race." Antihumanists.

Nero had perverse tastes in fun. He opened his gardens for the mass executions. Believers were crucified, sewn in animal skins and hunted by dogs, doused in pitch and lighted, raped in reenactments of Greek myths. Even the jaded Roman populace thought Nero was going too far. Nonetheless, sporadic arrests and killings continued for several years.

Paul may have been one of the early casualties, or he may have been imprisoned and killed as late as AD 68. Rome is the only city that claimed to hold Paul's tomb in the early centuries after his death, so it's a safe guess that he was tried and executed there. But all we know for sure is that three more of his letters survived to be included in the New Testament. They seem to date from the last years of his life, whenever that was, and they share certain themes in common.

First Timothy

At some point late in his career, Paul sent Timothy to handle some problems in Ephesus while he himself continued on to Macedonia. When he realized that he would not soon get back to Ephesus, he dispatched a note to Timothy with his instructions in black and white. This letter would be read aloud to the community and would remove all doubt that Paul's authority lay behind what Timothy was trying to accomplish.

Timothy's main assignment was to silence certain leaders who were teaching falsehood, and to make sure that qualified people were in leadership roles. The troublesome teachers were provoking useless controversy by inventing doctrines that had nothing to do with the essence of the gospel.

That essence, for Paul, was simple: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy

1:15). In all his years of passionately serving Christ, Paul had never lost his amazement that God had shown so much kindness, and even honor, to someone who had actually murdered His people. Wide-eyed gratitude had always shielded Paul from pride, and he wanted to set that example before the leaders in Ephesus, especially Timothy.

Beyond that example, Paul had specific criteria for assessing candidates for leadership in the community. Integrity, proven ability to govern one's own family, and experience in serving Christ figured prominently. Several times Paul repeated that an overfondness for money was something to watch out for.

He also had instructions for what should happen in community gatherings. Believers should pray for the pagan civil authorities (which, despite his own experiences in prison, Paul viewed as a gift from God). Disputes should be reconciled before the group gathered to pray. Women should dress modestly, gaining their self-esteem not from being the best dressed but from the quality of their service to others. They should also not compete with the men for control.

The community should take responsibility to care for widows who were truly in need. In fact, one of the things that impressed pagans the most about the followers of Christ was the way they took care of poor members. But Paul insisted that the group as a whole should not have to support elderly people who had family, for it was first the family's responsibility to care for its own. Also, there was no sponging off the community; those on support had to be too old to work and known for their past service. Paul counseled younger widows not to make vows of chastity because eventually they might want to get married. As happy as Paul was in the single life, he was ever practical.

Paul encouraged Timothy to believe the prophecies spoken over him years earlier, and not to let anyone look down on him for being barely thirty years old. Love, faithfulness, and God's commission were his qualifications for leadership, not age. (Timothy seems to have been persistently inclined to self-doubt.) Paul viewed Timothy as his son in a special way, and he pulled out all the stops to offer the support of an affectionate coach.

Titus

Titus, another of Paul's longtime team members, was probably not much older than Timothy but had a tougher personality. At some point Paul worked briefly in Crete and then left Titus to remain as his representative until another team member could replace him.

Crete was no easy assignment. The laziness, wickedness, and dishonesty of its people were proverbial, even among pagans. When Apollos and a lawyer named Zenas happened to be passing through Crete, Paul asked them to carry a letter to Titus so that, like Timothy, he would have his authorization from Paul in writing. His instructions were much like those Timothy received: evaluating the character of potential leaders; silencing factions who had unethical motives, and who were threatening to seriously sidetrack the group; teaching and modeling a lifestyle consistent with a believer's mission in the world. "Doing what is good" became a refrain in this letter sent to a community who apparently found this a challenge.

Second Timothy

Paul's second letter to Timothy was the farewell of a man who knew he was about to die. He was no longer under house arrest, but sat chained in a cold, damp dungeon somewhere in the bowels of Rome. One of his friends even had trouble finding out where he was being kept. He was lonely — some colleagues had deserted him, others were away on assignment, and only Luke remained. Paul wrote to Timothy partly to ask him to come and be with him during his last days. Of Timothy, Paul had told the Philippians, "I have no one else like him" (Philippians 2:20). He wanted his favorite son with him.

Personal desires never completely overshadowed Paul's sense of ministry, however. Many of the original apostles were dead, and all were aging. It was time to pass the baton to the next generation — people like Titus and Timothy and the leaders in local communities. Paul's chief concern was that this generation understand the gospel accurately and thoroughly, and that they pass it on the same way to those who came after them. There were so many teachers traveling from town to town with concoctions

of the gospel and pagan mysticism. Paul had devoted his life to keeping the gospel pure — not so that it could be set in concrete, but so that it would remain unencumbered by cultural trappings or outright falsehood. A Jewish gospel or a Greek gospel would be impotent to renew lives in Spain or Africa.

Likewise, just as they had to keep the message pure, so the upcoming generation had to keep their lives pure. Corruption would be forever licking at leaders' heels, and many would give in. Paul charged Timothy to set an example with his own life, and not to shrink from confronting other leaders to keep them from dragging whole communities down with them. (Paul had confronted even Peter when the gospel was at stake.) On the other hand, quarreling and resentment were absolutely to be avoided. Confrontation did not mean mudslinging.

Paul did not hide his personal pain from his friend, but he didn't want Timothy to be discouraged by it. Yes, it hurt that everyone deserted him at his trial. But that didn't matter because "the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear of it" (2 Timothy 4:17). Even trial and martyrdom could be used for God's agenda. Let the pagans watch how a believer handles suffering and death; let them wonder at his joy and hope; let them ask where this hope came from. He would tell them this:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day. (2 Timothy 4:7-8)