

## THE STRUCTURE OF 1 TIMOTHY RECONSIDERED

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### Different approaches to the structure of 1 Timothy

The opinion on the structure of Paul's first letter to Timothy is very much diversified.<sup>1</sup> One widely-used approach is to see two major divisions in the body of the letter, 1.3–3.16 and 4.1–6.21, as reflected in the “Outline of Content” of this letter supplied by the Good News Bible (GNB). This approach is probably based on the observations that there is hymn-like material placed at the middle of the letter (3.14-16) and that the section before the hymn-like material (1.3–3.13) generally deals with issues related to the governance of the church, while the issues dealt with in the section after it are more specific in nature. Hence, in “A Quick Look at This Letter” that the Contemporary English Version (CEV) supplies for this letter, we have the outline of contents as follows:

- Greetings (1.1-2)
- Instructions for Church Life (1.3–3.13)
- The Mystery of Our Religion (3.14–4.5)
- Paul's Advice to Timothy (4.6–6.21)

In this outline, 1.3–3.13 and 4.6–6.21 are the two major sections of the letter, and 3.14–4.5 contains the hymn-like material which is seen as the literary unit to divide the letter into two parts.

A similar approach is also adopted by I. Howard Marshall in his commentary in the ICC series. The major skeleton of his proposed analysis of 1 Timothy is as follows:

- Opening Salutation (1.1-2)
- Body of the Letter – A. Teachers and Church Leaders (1.3–3.16)
  - I. Instruction to Avoid False Doctrine (1.3-20)  
...
  - II. Instruction on Prayer (2.1-15)  
...
  - III. Qualifications for Overseers and Deacons (3.1-13)  
...
  - IV. The Church and the Mystery of the Faith (3.14-16)  
...

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<sup>1</sup> A good survey on scholars' opinions about the analysis of this letter can be seen in I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 25-33.

Body of the Letter – B. The Attitude of the Church Leader to the Church and the Groups in It (4.1–6.21a)

I. Timothy’s Duties As a Teacher in the Face of Heresy (4.1-16)

...

II. The Treatment of Various Groups in the Church (5.1–6.2a)

...

III. True and False Teachers Contrasted (6.2b-21a)

...

Closing Greeting (6.21b)<sup>2</sup>

This outline is also shared by Marshall’s co-writer, Philip H. Towner, in the latter’s own commentary recently published in the New International Commentary on the New Testament series. The major skeleton of Towner’s version is as follows:

I. Opening Greeting (1.1-2)

II. Body of the Letter (1.3–6.21a)

A. Ordering and Organizing God’s Household: Part I (1.3–3.16)

...

B. Ordering and Organizing God’s Household: Part II (4.1–6.21a)

...

III. Closing Benediction (6.21b)<sup>3</sup>

As Marshall sees it, “The body of the letter basically falls into two main sections 1.3–3.16 and 4.1–6.21a, with remarkably similar themes and patterns” as “in each case the writer starts with the fact of heresy.”<sup>4</sup> Marshall’s observation is valuable and moves in the right direction but it does not take into account some differences between his two sections. On the one hand, there is no counterpart in the second section to Paul’s reflection on his apostleship in view of his past in the first section (1.12-17); and, on the other hand, there are two units in his second section dealing with the issue of false teachers (4.1-4 and 6.2b-10) while in his first section, there is only one (1.3-7). These two sections are similar in some ways but there are also enough differences to raise questions about the parallelism that Marshall posits.

If GNB, CEV, and Marshall’s and Towner’s commentaries represent one extreme, in which a two-section arrangement is proposed for the structure of 1 Timothy, the other extreme for the analysis of 1 Timothy is to see no specific literary pattern at all. The works of Daniel C. Arichea and Howard A. Hatton, George W. Knight III, James D. Miller, and Luke Timothy Johnson fall into the latter group. Arichea and Hatton<sup>5</sup> divide the letter into ten sections as follows:

<sup>2</sup> See Marshall, *Epistles*, 30. The further breakdowns under his second level analysis are omitted here to highlight the major skeleton of his analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), ix-xi. The further breakdowns are omitted here to highlight the major skeleton of the analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, *Epistles*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel C. Arichea and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), v. The further breakdowns are omitted here to highlight the major skeleton of their analysis.

- A. Salutation, 1.1-2.
- B. Warnings against false teaching, 1.3-11.
- C. Paul's gratitude to Christ Jesus, 1.12-17.
- D. Paul encourages Timothy to be faithful, 1.18-20.
- E. Instructions regarding Christian worship and organization, 2.1-3.13.  
.....
- F. Summary statement of purpose, 3.14-15.
- G. A hymn to Christ, 3.16.
- H. Instructions on Timothy's proper conduct as a church leader, 4.1-16.  
.....
- I. Further instructions regarding Timothy's ministry, 5.1-6.19.  
.....
- J. Concluding instruction to Timothy, 6.20-21.

Knight<sup>6</sup> also identifies ten sections, but his divisions are very different from Arichea and Hatton's:

Salutation (1.1-2)

Paul's Command to Timothy to Withstand False Doctrine and to Further the Gospel and Its Goal, Which Is Love (1.3-20)  
.....

Prayer for All; Conduct of Women (2.1-15)  
.....

Qualifications for Bishops and Deacons (3.1-16)  
.....

Apostasy; a Good Minister's Discipline (4.1-16)  
.....

Duties toward Others (5.1-6.2)  
.....

Final Indictment of False Teachers and Warning against Love of Money (6.3-10)  
.....

Final Exhortation to Timothy (6.11-16)

Instructions for the Rich (6.17-19)

Final Charge to Timothy (6.20-21)

In Miller's and Johnson's views, however, ten sections are not enough to do justice to the content of the letter. Miller<sup>7</sup> sees eleven divisions in the text:

- |          |                                  |
|----------|----------------------------------|
| 1.1-2    | Epistolary salutation            |
| 1.3-7    | Epistolary motive                |
| 1.8-11   | Traditional sayings (on the law) |
| 1.12-17  | Autobiographical material        |
| 1.18-20  | An apostolic charge              |
| 2.1-3.16 | Community regulations            |
| 4.1-5    | Eschatological polemic           |
| 4.6-10   | Traditional admonitions          |

6 George W. Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), viii-ix. The further breakdowns are omitted here to highlight the major skeleton of his analysis.

7 James D. Miller, *The Pastoral Letters as Composite Documents* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 93; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57-95.

- 4.11-16 Traditional admonitions
- 5.1-22 Community rules
- 5.22-25 Miscellaneous admonitions
- 6.1-2 On the conduct of slaves
- 6.3-21 Miscellaneous injunctions

For Johnson,<sup>8</sup> fourteen divisions can be detected in the text:

- I. The Greetings (1.1-2)
- II. The Opening Commission (1.3-11)
- III. Thanks for Empowering Mercy (1.12-17)
- IV. The Charge Repeated (1.18-20)
- V. Instructions on Prayer (2.1-7)
- VI. Gender Roles in Worship (2.8-15)
- VII. Qualifications of the Supervisor (3.1-7)
- VIII. Behavior in the Household of God (3.8-16)
- IX. Opposition to Healthy Teaching (4.1-7a)
- X. Modeling Healthy Teaching (4.7b-16)
- XI. Crisis in the Care of Widows (5.1-16)
- XII. More Community Directives (5.17-6.2a)
- XIII. Cravings for Wealth (6.2b-10)
- XIV. Closing Commission (6.11-21)

By placing these analyses in juxtaposition, we can see how diversified the opinions are among the scholars who see no literary pattern in this letter. It is interesting to note that Knight regards 1.3-20 as forming one unit, while Arichea and Hatton and Johnson actually divide the section into three units; however, for Miller, there are four, not three, units in 1.3-20. Johnson treats 6.11-21 as one unit, but Knight divides it into three. For Miller, 6.11-21 is only part of the larger unit of 6.3-21. They seem to agree only that 1.1-2 is the salutation or greeting of the letter. As for the rest, their opinions differ.

### **A new approach to the structure of 1 Timothy**

The nature of the text of the letter could be to blame for the great differences among these analyses.<sup>9</sup> However, as I see it, the reason that “coming to grips with 1 Timothy as a literary composition has always been difficult”<sup>10</sup> is the fact that analyses have not been done from a more appropriate perspective. As I will demonstrate below, there is actually a pattern of topic-shift that recurs three times in the letter, and the coherence of the letter can be seen to consist in this recurring pattern.

In a personal letter from one person to another, just like any dialogue between two people, the topics<sup>11</sup> can normally fall into one of three possible broad categories:

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8 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Anchor Bible 35A; New York: Doubleday, 2001), viii-ix.

9 See, for example, the discussion in Johnson, *Timothy*, 137-39.

10 Johnson, *Timothy*, 137.

11 The term “topic” is used here in a non-theoretical and general sense, namely, “what is being talked about” in an oral or written communication. For a discussion of the notion of “topic” from the viewpoint

(1) topics to do with the letter writer, (2) topics to do with the letter recipient, and (3) topics to do with neither. Using this categorization, we find that the content of 1 Timothy after the salutation (1.1-2) actually contains all three categories of topics. The topic of 1.12-17 and 2.7 has mainly to do with the letter writer, Paul (henceforth, P unit). The topics of 1.18-20; 3.14-15; 4.6-16; 6.11-16; and 6.20-21 have generally to do with the letter recipient, Timothy (henceforth, T units). And the topics of the rest of the letter, 1.3-11; 2.1-6, 8-15; 3.1-13, 16; 4.1-5; 5.1-6.10, 17-19, have to do with neither the writer nor the recipient. For the last category, to which the largest portion of the text of the letter belongs, the topics can be further categorized by two major subcategories: (a) the subcategory of topics related to false teaching and false teachers (henceforth, F units); and (b) the subcategory of topics related to instructions for church administration and church life (henceforth, C units). For F units, we have 1.3-11; 4.1-5; and 6.2b-10; while for C units, we have 2.1-6; 2.8-3.13; 5.1-6.2a; and 6.17-19. The only verse that seems to elude the above categories and subcategories is 3.16, which is hymn-like material.

Using the above approach, the text of the letter can be charted as followed:

1.1-2	Salutation
1.3-11	F unit
1.12-17	P unit
1.18-20	T unit
2.1-6	C unit
2.7	P unit
2.8-3.13	C unit
3.14-15	T unit
3.16	Hymn-like Material
4.1-5	F unit
4.6-16	T unit
5.1-6.2a	C unit
6.2b-10	F unit
6.11-16	T unit
6.17-19	C unit
6.20-21	T unit

If we disregard the two P units, what we can see in the above chart is a tendency that (a) units with topics related to false teachings and false teachers come before units with topics to do with Timothy, and (b) all topics related to instructions about church administration and church life immediately follow units with topics to do with Timothy. For the convenience of the discussion, we label this tendency as an F-T-C pattern. In the body of the letter, there are two exact examples of the F-T-C pattern, i.e., 4.1-6.2a and 6.2b-19. The section 1.3-3.13 also follows this F-T-C pattern in general, but between the F unit (1.3-11) and T unit (1.18-20) a P unit (1.12-17) is inserted; and also within the C unit (2.1-6 and 2.8-3.13), there is another short P unit (2.7) inserted.

Can this F-T-C tendency be seen as the governing literary pattern of the letter? A closer look at the rhetorical functions of the P units (1.12-17 and 2.7) is needed before this question can be answered. For the first P unit (1.12-17), Marshall has rightly observed,

The purpose of the statement must be ascertained in the light of its role in relation to the charge to Timothy and its content as a self-description of Paul, and is probably manifold. (a) It may emphasise the authority of Paul, who occupies a unique position as a convert. He is both example and steward of the gospel. (b) It certainly stresses how God can save the worst of sinners, because they acted in ignorance and unbelief. (c) Implicitly it shows how salvation is effected independently of the law through faith in Christ. Thus the traditional formulation of the Christ-event, which Paul has experienced and which as apostle he authenticates . . . , is used to form an exemplary statement of the gospel which must be intended to contrast with false teaching.<sup>12</sup>

Johnson also regards this unit as having a similar function: he comments that it can be read “as part of Paul’s opening statement against the opponents,” and that “Paul’s own experience confirms his statement concerning the goal of the commandment and confutes the position of the false teachers concerning the Law.”<sup>13</sup>

What is missing, though, from the above observations is the implication that, since Paul, who was “the foremost of sinners” (1.15 RSV), could become a servant of the Lord because of God’s grace and mercy, Timothy should also understand that his own responsibility includes turning the false teachers back to the true gospel, if possible, as he refutes their false teachings. This implication, then, prevents us from understanding the statements “you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine . . .” (1.3 NRSV) and “I have turned over to Satan . . .” (1.20 NRSV) as casting them out of the church and putting them outside of God’s saving grace because of their false teachings. On the contrary, when Timothy refutes their false teachings, he should do so with a view to their repentance.<sup>14</sup>

In brief, the P unit of 1.12-17 probably has the following rhetorical functions: (a) Paul uses his own past experience to show what true gospel is and also, perhaps, to restate his authority as an apostle; (b) by doing so, he confirms his earlier statement about love (1.5) and hence refutes the false teachers’ teachings regarding Law; and (c) he also uses his own experience to remind Timothy about his responsibility to seek the false teachers’ repentance when there is a chance. This P unit is therefore closely related to the topic of false teaching in the F unit of 1.3-11 and also the topic of the T unit of 1.18-20. Since its rhetorical functions are closely related to the treatment of false teachers and their teachings as well as to Timothy’s responsibility as a commissioned church leader, the message of the P unit should be seen as applicable to and underlying the F and T units of 4.1-16 and the F and T units of 6.2b-16.

12 Marshall, *Epistles*, 385.

13 Johnson, *Timothy*, 182. See also Knight, *Epistles*, 92.

14 So rightly, Marshall, *Epistles*, 415.

As to the P unit of 2.7, several scholars have pointed out its polemical function in view of the presence of false teachers who would attempt to confine the gospel to Jews, or in view of their challenge to Paul's apostolic authority.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Paul's emphasis on his own apostleship here is not so much for the sake of Timothy, the immediate recipient of the letter, but for the sake of others in the Ephesian church with whom Timothy would share the injunctions given in the letter.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the rhetorical function of this P unit cannot be seen as merely to undergird the injunction in the letter's first C unit (2.1-6) with apostolic authority.<sup>17</sup> The stress on Paul's apostolic authority of this P unit also sets the tone for all instructions (or C units) afterwards.

According to the above analysis of the rhetorical functions of these P units (1.12-17 and 2.7), the F-T-C pattern of 4.1-6.2a and that of 6.2b-19 is then not substantially different from the F-P-T-C-P-C pattern of 1.3-3.13, because the message of the first P unit (1.12-17) is also implied for the F and T units in 4.1-6.2a and 6.2b-19; and the second P unit (2.7) supplies all C units with an apostolic authority. In such a way, the F-T-C pattern can be seen as the governing recurring literary pattern for the letter. It occurs three times in 1 Timothy: first, in 1.3-3.13 (with two P units inserted); second, in 4.1-6.2a; and last, in 6.2b-19.

Among these three F-T-C patterns, the first two sections (1.3-3.13 and 4.1-6.2a) are longer and the last one (6.2b-19) is shorter. Between the first and the second sections, there is a short T unit followed by the hymn-like material of 3.16. This T unit and the hymn-like material can be seen as marking the end of the first major section, or as a transition from the first major section to the second one. As to the short T unit in the end of the letter (6.20-21), it can be seen as the concluding warning or reminder to Timothy. Its content echoes the topics of opposing false teachers and false teachings of all F units in the letter (1.3-11; 4.1-5; and 6.3-10).

Thus the structure of 1 Timothy can be shown as follows:

**1.1-2 Salutation**

**1.3-3.13 Section I**

- 1.3-11 Warning against False Teachings I: Love and Law
- 1.12-17 Paul's Own Example
- 1.18-20 Exhortation for Timothy I
- 2.1-3.13 Instructions Regarding Prayer, Worship and Qualifications of Leaders (with Paul's Assertion of His Apostleship)

**3.14-15 The Household of God**

**3.16 Hymn-like Material: The Mystery of the Faith**

**4.1-6.2a Section II**

- 4.1-5 Warning against False Teachings II: Marriage and Food
- 4.6-16 Exhortation for Timothy II
- 5.1-6.2a Instructions Regarding Different Groups in the Church

15 See, e.g., Johnson, *Timothy*, 197; Marshall, *Epistles*, 433.

16 Johnson, *Timothy*, 197.

17 Towner sees 2.1-7 as "a coherent unit of thought" (*Letters*, 164) and this view may not take into account the rhetorical function of 2.7 in its wider context.

**6.2b-19 Section III**

- 6.2b-10 Warning against False Teachings III: Wealth
- 6.11-16 Exhortation for Timothy III
- 6.17-19 Instructions Regarding the Rich

**6.20-21 Concluding Reminders**

Since for both the instructions of 2.1–3.13 and those of 5.1–6.2a there is more than one topic, the analysis can then be further expanded as follows:

**1.1-2 Salutation****1.3–3.13 Section I**

- 1.3-11 Warning against False Teachings I: Love and Law
- 1.12-17 Paul's Own Example
- 1.18-20 Exhortation for Timothy I
- 2.1–3.13 Instructions Regarding Prayers, Worship and Qualifications of Leaders
  - 2.1-6 *Instructions on Prayers*
  - 2.7 *Paul's Apostleship*
  - 2.8-15 *Gender Roles in Worship*
  - 3.1-7 *Qualifications for Overseers*
  - 3.8-13 *Qualifications for Deacons*

**3.14-15 The Household of God****3.16 Hymn-like Material: The Mystery of the Faith****4.1–6.2a Section II**

- 4.1-5 Warning against False Teachings II: Marriage and Food
- 4.6-16 Exhortation for Timothy II
- 5.1–6.2a Instructions Regarding Different Groups in the Church
  - 5.1-2 *Appropriate Attitudes in Exhortations*
  - 5.3-16 *Regarding Widows*
  - 5.17-25 *Regarding Elders and Accusation*
  - 6.1-2a *Instructions for Slaves*

**6.2b-19 Section III**

- 6.2b-10 Warning against False Teachings III: Wealth
- 6.11-16 Exhortation for Timothy III
- 6.17-19 Instructions Regarding the Rich

**6.20-21 Concluding Reminders****Conclusion: Some observations from the above structure of 1 Timothy**

The above analysis does not claim to be identical with, or to have anything to do with, the literary structure perceived and consciously planned by the author of 1 Timothy. Structuring a text with an outline has not so much to do with the identification of its author's design in composition but serves rather the heuristic purpose of helping readers to appreciate and to make sense of its internal logic and flow of thought. From the latter point of view, our analysis has the following merits in comparison with the other analyses which we discussed earlier:

First, putting the three F units at the beginning of the three sections highlights one of the possible rhetorical situations that concerned the author writing this



letter: that is, the negative influence of false teachers and teachings. From our analysis, readers can easily identify the problems of the false teachers, which are the misuse of law (1.3-11), the misunderstanding about marriage and dietary regulations (4.1-5), and the mishandling of wealth (6.2b-10).

Second, our analysis also draws readers' attention to the close proximity between F units and T units: each F unit in the letter is followed by a T unit, and the content of each T unit is related to the F unit preceding it in one way or the other. In the first F-T pair, the phrase "having faith and good conscience" (1.19 NRSV) in the T unit echoes "faith" (1.4, 5 NRSV) and "conscience" (1.5 NRSV) in the F unit. In the second F-T pair, "the sound teaching" (4.6 NRSV) mentioned in the T unit is set in contrast to the "deceitful spirits and teachings of demons" (4.1 NRSV) in the preceding F unit. In the last F-T pair, in the T unit (cf. 6.11) Timothy is instructed to shun all the false teachings (cf. 6.3) and senseless and harmful desires (cf. 6.9) mentioned in the preceding F unit. In such a way, the T units are encouragements to Timothy about the way he should act and about the instructions he should give as a minister in view of the existence of the false teachers and their teaching. In contrast with the counter-examples of the false teachers in the F units, the T units following them point out the example that a true Christian teacher should demonstrate.

Third, with our analysis readers can notice that among the three F-T-C patterns, only the content of the C unit in the last F-T-C pattern continues the topic of the preceding F-T pair. The instructions regarding the rich in the last C unit (6.17-19) continue the topic of the love of money (cf. 6.10) in the preceding F unit. However, readers can also notice that in the first two F-T-C patterns the contents of the C units are not related to the topics of the preceding F-T pairs. As shown in our analysis, the first C unit (2.1-3.13) contains topics to do with prayer, worship, and qualifications of church leaders, while the second C unit (4.1-6.2a) contains instructions regarding the handling of different groups: widows, elders, and slaves. These two C units, then, can be seen as revealing some other possible rhetorical situations that the recipient was facing when the author wrote this letter, or as pointing out the areas that a good Christian minister should pay attention to.