



It's in the Minutes

1 Timothy and Titus record councils choosing young adults as leaders of the early Christian church.

by John McVay

IF I COULD TAKE YOU TO THE ARCHIVES OF SOME of the more successful businesses of our day and point out the minutes of their early, foundational meetings, would you be interested? Would you want to dig about in those annals of the past for the secrets of the company's success? Imagine going to the archives of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream, Esprit, or Apple Computer and extracting the minutes of their first meetings. Picture yourself researching until you come across the reasons for the company's success, the features that separated the upstart from the established competition.

What if you could recover the early proceedings of the Christian church? What gave this movement its energy and power? What fueled its conquest? What secrets transformed it from a small, insignificant Jewish sect into a worldwide movement?

1 Timothy provides an important answer to

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those questions in its extract from the "minutes" of early Christianity:

These are things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders (1 Timothy 4:11-16).¹

The church flourished and grew by asking youth to lead it. That is a timely theme of the letters to Timothy and Titus.

Interpretive Knots

Of course there are many other themes and questions we can find in this correspondence. I am intrigued by the ways we appropriate the themes and approach the questions introduced by these pastoral epistles.² One only need turn to 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and envision different people reading the passage.³ One Adventist reader straightforwardly

appropriates the desirability of “lifting up holy hands,” counsel, but ignores the words about excluding “gold, pearls, or expensive clothes.” Let alone the call for the silence and submission of women, who, after all, are “saved through childbearing.” Another Adventist squirms at the advice to “[lift] up holy hands,” but enthusiastically embraces lines in Timothy about modesty and the appropriateness of women serving in certain roles.

This passage, 1 Timothy 2:8-15, provides only a few of the interpretive knots served up in these three short letters. What does it mean to turn someone “over to Satan” (1 Timothy 1:20)? What are the “deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” and the “myths and endless genealogies” mentioned here? And what do you make of 1 Timothy 5:24 (“The sins of some people are conspicuous and precede them to judgment, while the sins of others follow them there”)? A close look at the hymn (or hymn fragment) of 1 Timothy 3:16 adds more interpretive riddles.

For Seventh-day Adventists, the pastoral epistles contribute additional challenges in providing an interesting analysis of the role of law (1 Timothy 1:8-11) and by seeming to sanction the eating of unclean foods (1 Timothy 4:1-5) and the drinking of “wine” (1 Timothy 5:23).

On top of all this, there are the critical issues that surround the study of these three letters, letters that are frequently judged to come from a generation after the Apostle Paul because of the literary style used, the theological perspectives displayed, the level of church organization assumed, and the nature of the opponents implied.⁴

Young Leadership of Early Christians

With all of these issues to prompt discussion in Sabbath schools across the land, I am fearful that the theme of youth, and what they can contribute to the church, may go unnoticed. Certainly, the letters of Timothy and Titus could be misread with regard to youth in the church. 1 Timothy 3:6 says of a bishop, “He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (cf. Titus 1:5-9). And of deacons, 1 Timothy instructs: “Deacons likewise must be serious [and the somber faces of aged pioneers rise, apparition-like, in our minds] . . . And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons” (3:8,10). We tend to insert a few words—

“And let them first be tested for a *decade or*

two.” We read such cautions as affirmation of the view that the church is best led by highly experienced, older people.

We should not forget to whom this author writes. Paul is giving these instructions to one who is to superintend the selection of these tested leaders. And to that superintendent he says, “Let no one despise your youth” (1 Timothy 4:12); compare the similar words to Titus (Titus 2:7, 8, 15). This one-person nominating committee is so young he is in danger of being despised for it.

At the time of 1 Timothy, the addressee is young enough to be open to suspicion simply because of his age. By the standards of the day, he was probably somewhat over 30.⁵ But the letter looks back to an earlier point in

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Timothy's story. And it is that earlier scene that discloses the important secret of success: "Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders" (1 Timothy 4:14).

The term, "council of elders" (*presbyterion*), is used to designate two groups in the New Testament. In Luke and Acts, it is used to describe the Sanhedrin, the Jewish "council of elders" that condemns Jesus (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5). But in 1 Timothy, "council of elders" describes a Christian group. And the letter includes the only excerpt we have from the minutes of an early Christian council of elders.

The apostle may refer to the work of that council in two other passages in the pastoral epistles. In 1 Timothy 1:18-19a, he writes:

I am giving you these instructions, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies made earlier about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, having faith and a good conscience.

In 2 Timothy 1:6, he reminds the youthful leader to "rekindle the grace of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands."

According to minutes of that early council of elders in 1 Timothy, the group of seasoned Christians kneel in prayer. Voice after voice is raised in the most earnest, heartfelt prayer. In the center of the prayer circle is a very young person, a youth probably still in his teens. After a pause, an older woman speaks. And with a quivering voice, she describes the dreams that God has planted in her soul for this teenage Timothy. She describes in considerable detail a divine destiny for this youngster. When she is through, another voice is raised to praise the promise and potential of this one planted in their midst. The young man in the middle cries the quiet tears of one who experiences complete acceptance and trust. Do you see the secret? Do you see what it is

that makes this "council of elders" different from the competition?

Young Leadership of Seventh-day Adventists

Our church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, began as a movement of young people. True, the old sea captain, Joseph Bates, was there. But, by and large, it was a movement started by the young, among the young. It is easy to forget that fact as we stare at the yellow portraits of pioneers with their austere, wrinkled faces framed in gray. It is easy to forget that the old patriarch, Uriah Smith, was 21 when he wrote his first series of articles for the *Review and Herald*. We forget that when he became editor of that journal he was not 53, 43, or even 33, but 23 years old. His job description included the tasks of editor, proofreader, business manager, and bookkeeper.

We rejoice in the stories of pioneer James White winning 1,000 people to Christ in a few short weeks; a James White that had just turned 21 years of age. We forget that the somber and aged Stephen Haskell began teaching the Sabbath at 20 years of age, that the bespectacled and bearded Elder J. N. Andrews, after accepting the Sabbath at 17, began his ministerial career at 23. And when Ellen Harmon began to exercise her gifts, she had just celebrated her 17th birthday.

How is it with us? How much time do we spend envisioning what God wishes to accomplish through our young adults? How many committees find themselves kneeling around a young person, praying for the will of God to be manifested in that life? We are an enlightened group. We invite youth representatives to sit on our boards, to give us their counsel, to enable us to see our tasks through youthful eyes. What if we took a cue from the fragment of the minutes of that board of elders

of long ago? What if, instead of youth advising us in our work, we advised them in theirs? What if we spent more time on our knees unleashing youthful warriors to share the gospel of peace?

If an early Christian elders' council shows us the "how to," an even earlier elders' council shows us "how not to." The youthful gaze of the young Galilean leaders meets the steel facades of the elders. The leader of the council speaks. Pointing a quivering, bony finger, he commands imperiously: "If you are the Messiah, tell us."

The exchange comes, rapid fire. The youthful Teacher looks at those elders and says, "If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God."

A rumble of condemnation rises from the aged lips: "Are you, then, the son of God?"

"You say I am."

Irate gestures ensue. Necks snap in anger and gray-bearded chins vibrate in disgust. An uproar rises from those 70 council members that makes the most rowdy parliamentary session sound genteel. The tumult peaks in this proclamation: "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!" (Luke 22:66-71)

A young person stands in the midst of the council of elders. A young man who has shown himself to be a teacher. A young adult who has born the mark of Heaven's praise. A person who is truly God's gift to the world. A young man amidst the council of elders. A young person condemned.

Will we follow the outmoded ways of a council that condemns a young Messiah? Or will we read carefully the minutes of that upstart enterprise, Christianity, and take as a central task the affirmation of our youthful members?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

2. One commentator reminds us that "Pastoral letters' do not mean 'to be ignored by laity.'" Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 1.

3. For an example of the variety of interpretations of this passage within Adventism, compare Samuele Bacchiocchi's approach in *Women in Church* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1987) with Madelynn Haldeman's treatment, "Those problem passages . . .", *Ponderings*, 2:3, (March/April 1989), pp. 24-31.

4. At least two recent commentaries defend the idea

that Paul is the author of the letters: Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988); Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*. One of the more interesting proposals with regard to the Pastorals (especially 2 Timothy) is Michael Prior's *Paul the Letter-Writer and the Second Letter to Timothy*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), p. 23. Prior argues that the co-authorship of the earlier Pauline epistles should be taken more seriously and that it is in the pastorals that Paul as sole author is represented. And 2 Timothy is not Paul's "swan song," but a letter written in preparation for a further missionary journey.

5. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 2.