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*The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*  
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Requests for information should be addressed to:

**Zondervan Publishing House**

*Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Liefeld, Walter L.

1 and 2 Timothy/Titus / Walter L. Liefeld.

p. cm.—(NIV application commentary)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN: 0-310-50110-5

1. Bible. N.T. Pastoral Epistles—Commentaries. I. Title. II. Title: First and second Timothy/Titus. III. Series.

BS 2735.3.L54 1999

227.83077—dc21

99-18861  
CIP

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This edition printed on acid-free paper.

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*Printed in the United States of America*

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# 1 Timothy 1:1–2



**P**AUL, AN APOSTLE of Christ Jesus by the command of  
God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,  
<sup>2</sup>To Timothy my true son in the faith:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ  
Jesus our Lord.



THE OPENING LINES of letters at the time of the New Testament followed a conventional style, which included the names of both sender and recipient, with some kind words concerning the

latter and solicitous wishes for his or her well-being.<sup>1</sup>

## The Sender and His Authority (1:1a)

PAUL'S IDENTIFICATION OF himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus" is similar to the way he identifies himself in every other letter except Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In Galatians, where he was preparing to make some strong authoritative declarations about what the true gospel is and what it means, he enlarged on the implications of his unique apostleship (Gal. 1:1–2). Here, where he is going to address false teaching, he uses the unusual phrase "by the command of God our Savior." We know from several passages that Paul understood his being an apostle as a calling (cf. Rom. 1:1) "by the will of God" (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1), but this is the only salutation in a letter where he attributes his ministry to God's "command." The strong word used here (*epitage*) occurs again in 1:5, 18; 4:11; 5:7; 6:13, 17; Titus 1:3; 2:15.<sup>2</sup>

## Distinctive Elements About God and Jesus (1:1b)

PAUL CALLS GOD "our Savior." We are so used to thinking of Jesus as our Savior that the use of that term to describe God arrests our attention. The phrase "God our Savior" occurs only five times in the entire Old Testament (1 Chron.

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1. On the form of letters in the New Testament period see S. K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); P. T. O'Brien, "Letters, Letter Forms," *DPL*, 550–53.

2. See comments on 1:3, on the other passages, and esp. in the Bridging Contexts section for Titus 1:3.

16:35; Ps. 65:5; 68:19; 79:9; 85:4) and only six times in the New Testament, of which five are in the Pastoral Letters (here; 1 Tim 2:3; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4; Jude 25). In Titus 1:3 the phrase occurs in the salutation, as here, where it is also linked with the word "command."

It is striking to realize that although the word "salvation" appears forty-six times in the New Testament and the word "save" 107 times, "Savior" occurs only twenty-four times. In Paul's letters it occurs only twice outside of the Pastorals (Eph. 5:23; Phil. 3:20), but ten times within them (1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:3, 4; 2:10, 13; 3:4, 6). Almost half of the appearances of this word in the New Testament, therefore, are in the Pastoral Letters. Such words give Paul's opening words to Timothy (and also those to Titus) a weight of authority and majesty. The God who brought about the salvation of Israel time and time again has the authority to command Paul regarding the preservation of the true faith.

Paul goes on to describe Christ Jesus as "our hope." This phrase does not occur anywhere else, nor does the phrase "God our hope," but certainly the idea does. For example, "May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you" (Ps. 33:22). Three texts in Titus have the word "hope": "the hope of eternal life" (1:2; 3:7), and "the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (2:13). Significantly, the words "God" and "Savior" reappear in that phrase in connection with Jesus Christ.

### The Recipient (1:2a)

TIMOTHY IS PAUL'S "true son in the faith." The word for "true" (*gnesios*) is different from the more common one (*alēthes*), which means true as opposed to false. The present word means "genuine" as opposed to illegitimate or fake. The word could be used of a child born within a legitimate marriage, and the implication in the figurative statement here refers to the quality of Timothy's relationship to Paul. Paul had met this young man in Lystra; Acts 16:1 describes him as a "disciple," with a Jewish mother and Gentile father. Second Timothy 1:5 refers to Timothy's "sincere faith," which "first lived" in his grandmother and mother, Lois and Eunice. From his infancy Timothy had known the Scriptures, through which he had come to "salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15).

This repeated terminology about faith and the identification of his believing mother provides a background for Paul's reference to Timothy as his "true son in the faith." Timothy's mother provided the environment of Jewish faith in which he had grown up; Paul provided the nurture of his Christian faith. Since he is called a "disciple" at the outset of the Acts 16 narrative, he probably had become a Christian before Paul's arrival, possibly through Paul's earlier ministry in Lystra (Acts 14:8–20). Paul also had a part in the conferral of a spiritual endowment on Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6).

The other extant Pauline letters are to churches (and, at Philippi, to their leaders), not to individuals. Outside the Pastoral Letters only Philemon, which is clearly personal, is addressed to an individual. This fact gives the impression that the early churches had a plural leadership and that Timothy and Titus are addressed individually only because they have a special mission as “apostolate delegates” (i.e., sent by the apostle as his authorized representatives). These letters are probably not only for their personal reading but function as public documents attesting the authority bestowed on these two delegates.

### Kind Wishes (1:2b)

IT WAS CUSTOMARY for letters in the first century to convey kind wishes for the continued well-being of the recipients. Paul uses some Christian terms for this purpose, but also uses common terminology with a Christian meaning. Here he expresses these thoughts with the words “grace, mercy and peace.” Those who spoke Greek would normally greet a friend with the word *chaire*. The word for “grace,” *charis*, has a similar sound.

Paul’s third greeting, *eirene* (from which we derive our word irenic), means “peace.” This word recalls the Hebrew greeting *shalom*, which connotes wholeness and well-being as well as peace.

In addition to these usual two words of greeting in Paul’s letters, 1 and 2 Timothy add “mercy” (cf. also 2 John 3). This word can shade towards the idea of pity or compassion. It recalls the Hebrew *hesed*, with its overtones of mercy and kindness to those within God’s covenant. The terms *grace* and *mercy* imply that those who receive those benefits have a need they cannot fulfill themselves.

In most of his letters, Paul indicates, as here, that these beneficial favors come “from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.” This is not to deny the fact that the Holy Spirit gives gifts, but it simply attributes generosity to God as Father (James 1:17) and adds the name of Christ, who conveys God’s grace to us.



BRIDGING CONTEXTS IS always important, but because opening greetings seem so familiar, we may not realize that they also require attention. It is helpful to read such a text as these first two verses carefully, as though for the first time.

**Apostle.** Since communication requires shared points of reference, mention of a concept, event, person, or object is meaningless unless the reader or hearer has some knowledge of the subject. If we, for example, received a letter from an unknown person who identified him or herself as “the

Chancellor," we would need to know the significance of that word in the sender's vocabulary. Is this from the honorary head of some American university, from the prime minister of a foreign country, or perhaps from a British government official? In a similar manner, we cannot simply assume that a contemporary reader of Paul's letters knows what the term *apostle* means, especially how this word was used in a different culture and a different language nearly two thousand years ago.

Even if such a person knew that messengers, such as official envoys, were called *apostles* in ancient Greek, that person might not know the special use of the term for Jesus' apostles and for a few others, such as Paul. In the Jewish world later reflected in the Mishnah, the term *shaliach* denoted a person who was sent on a mission and was to be received as though he was the sender himself (*m. Ber. 5:5*). In the New Testament, the qualifications for being chosen to take over the "apostolic ministry" abandoned by Judas Iscariot included the stipulation that the candidate had been with the Lord Jesus during his ministry and had witnessed his resurrection (Acts 1:21–26). Paul's vision of the risen Lord and God's choice of him thus qualified him to serve as an apostle. Therefore, he calls himself "an apostle of Christ Jesus." Translators rendering this for some cultures may need to employ some culture-specific term both to express the meaning of apostleship and to explain why Paul functioned under a "command."<sup>3</sup>

**God and Christ.** The relationship between God and Christ is difficult to understand and explain. In verse 1 the command comes from both God and Christ Jesus. To those who have a non-Trinitarian monotheistic view of God, the term *God* excludes Christ. To those who have a polytheistic religion, Christ can also be a god, but the two persons (in Christian terms, the Father and the Son) would be considered different gods. The biblical view is that there is only one being who is God and that he exists in three persons. Christ, therefore, is God as to his *nature* and the Son as to his *person*. Many attempts have been made to illustrate the Trinity, but endeavors to do so from the material world fail because God is not material, but spirit in essence. Likewise, what is illogical or impossible in human experience does not determine what is logical or possible for God.<sup>4</sup>

Paul calls God "our Savior." During the Hellenistic period, when religious aspects of Greek culture blended with the Roman, the term *savior* was applied

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3. The literature on the term *apostle* is immense. For a useful summary with bibliography, which, though dated, contains literature from an important period of discussion on its meaning, see D. Müller and C. Brown, "Apostle," *NIDNTT*, 1:126–37. For a more recent treatment, see P. W. Barnett, "Apostle," *DPL*, 45–51.

4. For a superb study of passages where Christ is called "God," see Murray J. Harris, *Jesus As God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

to various mythical figures. In no case, however, was there a divine being who brought people into relationship with himself by personally removing the guilt of sin. The New Testament understanding of salvation is in accord with that of the Old Testament, not derived from the Greco-Roman world.<sup>5</sup> God is the Savior in both spiritual and human spheres. In understanding the significance of this concept in the pluralistic world of today, we need to maintain the distinctiveness of Christian salvation.

Of course this distinctiveness includes the truth that Christ, who is Immanuel (“God with us”), died to be our Savior. His death and resurrection bring forgiveness and eternal life. Therefore, when Paul calls Christ Jesus “our hope,” he is going beyond the ideas held in the various cultures of his day. As he says in 2 Timothy 1:10, Christ “destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”



**THE NEED FOR clarity and authority.** The biblical hope just mentioned often tends to be replaced by a subjective, fuzzy optimism about a future life. When we invite people to the Christian hope, we must do so with a clear explanation as to how the Christian message offers the only basis for hope. We must also proclaim this truth, as other truths, with biblical authority. This authority is an important theme in the Pastoral Letters. Unless the original reader had some awareness that this apostleship gave Paul authority to declare what was (or was not) orthodox teaching, Timothy’s attempt to repudiate false doctrine could seem overbearing.

That would especially be the case for anyone today who has a democratic, pluralistic worldview. On occasion, citizens will grant extraordinary authority to a ruler, such as happened in Belarus while I was writing this, in reaction to what many considered an ineffective democratic arrangement after years of monolithic communist rule. But in most countries today where there is a choice, totalitarianism is rejected. Likewise, to many people the idea of a mere human being claiming authority derived from God, such as happens in various cults, seems medieval or even worse. But we must not hesitate to state that what Paul speaks in his letters, he speaks with divine backing.

Furthermore, the whole idea of a coherent universe in which truth can be known objectively and a universe governed by exclusive divine authority is contrary to the postmodern worldview. By its very nature, 1 Timothy 1:1

Furthermore, the whole idea of a coherent universe in which truth can be known objectively and a universe governed by exclusive divine authority is contrary to the postmodern worldview. By its very nature, 1 Timothy 1:1

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5. For Old and New Testament teaching about salvation, see Liefeld, “Salvation,” *ISBE*, 4:287–95.

would be unacceptable to postmoderns. Therefore, not only do the elements in this verse require some definition, but the assumptions in it require some agreement before its implications can be accepted.

What significance does the fact that this letter was addressed to Timothy have for us? When we attempt to apply Scripture to contemporary life, it is sometimes helpful for us to identify with the nature and circumstances of biblical characters. Usually when we study narratives, it is easy to find events and personalities that are familiar to us. But there are not many readers who can identify with a young man who is called "son" by the outstanding Christian figure of his day and is given the difficult mission of correcting false teaching and countering false teachers. Yet there are aspects of his life and mission that are relevant to many of us. We need, of course, to assemble the various bits of information we have about him and his relationship with Paul from Acts and the two letters Paul wrote him. We can draw some conclusions about his personality (e.g., see 2 Tim. 1:6–8) and his youthfulness (1 Tim. 4:12).

Moreover, the reference to Timothy and his mission will, along with subsequent passages, serve to alert us to the formidable but necessary task to keep the church doctrinally pure. Once elders are in place, this is their job (see Acts 20:17–35 for Paul's charge to the elders of this very church at Ephesus; also see 1 Tim. 3:1–7 for the requirements of an overseer). But elders need to be instructed so that they will be prepared. The instructional sequence illustrated here in the relationship between Paul and Timothy and specified in 2 Timothy 2:2 can and should still be employed.

**The Christian vocabulary.** Like the word "hope" in verse 1, the words "grace, mercy and peace" in verse 2, properly understood, have an important place in contemporary Christian vocabulary. But they need clarification today. The problem with the term *grace* is that it is, on the one hand, so content specific in Christian use that it often fails to communicate to those who are not theologically literate, while on the other hand it has become such a common term with the nearly universal use of the hymn "Amazing Grace" that it tends to lose much of its inherent content. To read "grace be with you" to a person who knows nothing of Christianity can be as meaningless as hearing "the Force be with you" is to someone who does not know the American *Star Wars* vocabulary. The meaning of "grace," therefore, is not merely that God gives us free salvation. It is also more than "God's Riches At Christ's Expense," though there is truth in that acronym. The ancient Greek usage of that word implies an inability on the part of the recipient that requires the help of someone else. We need grace because we have no other option.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Philip Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) also tells us of our need to extend grace to others.

The middle term, *mercy*, seems (and theologically is) ego-deflating. Who wants to be in the position of needing mercy? And yet faithful churchgoers, in particular those in liturgical church services, acknowledge that need in saying the *Kyrie Eleison*, "Lord, have mercy." The key to understanding the importance of this concept is to have a healthy sense of one's own sin and need. That will bring about an appreciation for mercy.

The last term, *peace*, has become so diluted in its many applications today that it cannot be assumed people understand it specifically as the peace with God that has been brought about by being reconciled to God through the death of Christ on the cross. We should not hesitate to let other people know that they are out of sorts with God and that they need reconciliation.