

Presbuteroi in Paul's Letters to Timothy and Titus: God's Stewards, Entrusted with the Gospel for the Church and its Mission

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1. Introduction

The three letters from “Paul” to his delegates “Timothy” and “Titus” are perhaps the most important early Christian sources for the church office of πρεσβύτερος (“presbyter” or “elder”).¹ At least partly for this reason, these letters have long been the epicentre of debate about the identity and functions of the πρεσβύτεροι, and their relationship to the other titles mentioned in the letters, especially ἀπόστολος (“apostle”), ἐπίσκοπος (“overseer”), and διάκονος (“deacon”). While many see the πρεσβύτεροι (1 Tim 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5) as equivalent to the ἐπίσκοπος (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7),² others see a distinction between

¹ I refer to the author as “Paul,” or “the apostle Paul,” here and throughout, following the self-attestation of the letters (1 Tim 1:1–2; 2 Tim 1:1–2; Tit 1:1–4). Early Christian writers state or imply that the apostle Paul wrote these letters (e.g., 1 Clem. 2.7; 60.4; 61.2; Pol. Phil. 3.2; 4.1; 5.2; Irenaeus, *Haer.* §1. Pref. 1; 1.23.4; 2.14.7; 3.1.1; 4.16.3; 5.17.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.1, 9–10; 4.7; *Protr.* 1; Mur. Can. § 59–63). The majority of modern scholars, however, argue they were written by someone other than Paul, whether a “pseudepigrapher, secretary, redactor, or a combination of such” (Jermo van Nes, *Pauline Language and the Pastoral Epistles: A Study of Linguistic Variation in the Corpus Paulinum*. LBS 16 [Leiden: Brill, 2018], 221; cf. 5–110). Recent studies stress the individual character of each letter and their different relations to Paul and Pauline tradition. E.g., Jens Herzer, “Paulustradition und Paulusrezeption in den Pastoralbriefen,” in *Receptions of Paul in Early Christianity: The Person of Paul and His Writings Through the Eyes of His Early Interpreters*, ed. Jens Schröter, Simon Buttica, and Andreas Dettwiler (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 487–518; Benjamin L. White, “Letters to Paul’s Associates,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the New Testament*, ed. Patrick Gray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 261–73. Other scholars support the authenticity of these letters. E.g. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 35A (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 20–23, 55–100; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*. NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 1–89; Terry L. Wilder, “Pseudonymity, the New Testament, and the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2010), 28–51. While I am persuaded that the letters are authentic, my limited goal in this chapter is to examine the identity and functions of πρεσβύτεροι according to the “Paul” of these letters, regardless of who wrote them.

² The classic studies are: James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh:

two offices,³ or consider *πρεσβύτερος* “an imprecise term of honour,”⁴ or construe the relationship in other ways.⁵ My goal in this chapter is to engage this debate by providing a close analysis of these letters, read in the context of the wider Pauline corpus.⁶ In what follows, I consider: (1) the identity of the *πρεσβύτεροι* and their place in the church order envisioned by the letters; (2) the functions assigned to them; and (3) the regulations for the office. My thesis is that these letters employ *πρεσβύτερος* and *ἐπίσκοπος* as alternative titles for the same office, and primarily characterise the men appointed to the office as “God’s stewards” (Titus 1:7), who are entrusted with the gospel for the sake of the church and its mission.

T&T Clark, 1868), 2: 273–76; Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, 8th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1888), 95–99, 193. More recently: Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 746–47; Raymond E. Brown, “Episkopē and Episkopos: The New Testament Evidence,” *TS* 41 (1980): 333–34; Joseph Ysebaert, *Die Amtsterminologie im Neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche: Eine lexikographische Untersuchung*. (Breda: Eureia, 1994), 69–73; George W. Knight III, “Two Offices (Elders/Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching/Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A New Testament Study,” *Presb* 11 (1985): 1–12; Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*. *StBL* 57 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 135–56; Paul R. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*. *WUNT* 166 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 187, 449–55; Towner, *Letters*, 246–47, 686 (with caveats).

³ E.g., Ernst Käsemann, “Ministry and Community in the New Testament,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964), 87; Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J.A. Baker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), 107–8.

⁴ R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*. *SNTW* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 176–205, here 204. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus; Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 11th ed. *NTD* 9 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 31, 33, 36.

⁵ For reviews of the modern debate, see: I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. *ICC* (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 170–82; Merkle, *Elder*, 4–21; Jochen Wagner, *Die Anfänge des Amtes in der Kirche: Presbyter und Episkopen in der frühchristlichen Literatur*. *TANTZ* 53 (Tübingen: Francke, 2011), 23–30; Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 11–15.

⁶ The term *πρεσβύτερος* does not occur in the undisputed letters of Paul. While this terminological difference might be taken as evidence that the letters to Timothy and/or Titus are pseudonymous, Jermo van Nes has argued “that linguistic variation in the *Corpus Paulinum* need not necessarily be explained by author variation.” (van Nes, *Pauline Language*, 224). The distinctive terminology can be explained, for example, by the unique character and purpose of these letters – to address apostolic delegates rather than congregations (1 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4) and to provide instruction regarding church order (1 Tim 3:15; Tit 1:5). Since the wider Pauline tradition seems to refer to *πρεσβύτεροι* in other ways (see § 2.2), comparison may shed light on the *πρεσβύτεροι* in these letters.