

Does it matter how many letters Paul wrote?



Simon Jones, theologian and associate tutor at Spurgeon's College, London, explores the authorship of some of the New Testament epistles.

Which letters did Paul write?

There are 13 letters in the New Testament with Paul's name attached to them. Therefore, he must have written them, so that's all settled then...

But a majority of commentators and scholars suggest that only seven of them are undoubtedly genuine and therefore serve as a primary source of information about Paul's life and thought. These are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. The others are of disputed provenance (in the parlance!).

Some scholars accept that Paul either wrote or was closely involved in the production of Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians. Only a minority of New Testament specialists agree that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, the so-called Pastoral Letters. And this debate has been going on for more than two centuries.

So, why the doubts? There is no single reason why scholars doubt the provenance of some of Paul's letters. In the end it comes down to arguments about the style in which the letters are written and their suggested date of composition. Some letters appear more 'authentically' Pauline than others because of the language used in them; and some letters are harder to fit into the known chronology of Paul's life than others.

Paul and his mission

But a question not asked enough is, who was Paul and what did he understand his mission to be? If we see Paul as a church planter, asking and answering questions only about church matters (as a majority of commentators on the Pastorals do), his letters take on a different aspect than if we see him as a community organiser creating *ekklesia* (the Greek word usually translated as 'churches', but also used to apply to citizens' gatherings to decide policy) around the Roman empire that rival Caesar's with political claims about Jesus. This second view suggests that much of Paul's writing is about how we organise society under God.

In a 1976 book, *Redating the New Testament*, John Robinson suggested that it would be possible to fit all 13 of 'Paul's letters' into his lifetime (supposing he died in Rome in the mid-60s). In particular, Robinson suggested that many of the so-called 'prison epistles' were written while he was captive for two years in Caesarea Maritime from the mid to late-50s.

One letter that Robinson dates to this time is Titus. In chapter 24 of his Gospel, Luke tells us that Paul and the Roman governor had frequent conversations on the topic of the three cardinal Roman political values – justice, self-control and accountability (Luke 24:25, 'the coming judgement'). Here we see Paul arguing at length, not about Church, but about how to organise society under the one true God.

The three virtues at the heart of this conversation are also the focus of the letter to Titus. So, what if this is not a pastoral letter about how to organise the Church but a political and social theology about how to organise an alternative *ekklesia* to that of Caesar? And if it is that, which the style and language strongly suggests is the case, which first-century Jesus follower would have had the chutzpah to write such a document other than Paul?

This has a bearing on how scholars talk about the reception of the Pastoral Letters, in particular in the second and third centuries AD. Many commentators argue that the Pastorals assume a tripartite Church structure – presbyter, elder and deacon – that emerged at the end of the first century and became fixed by the mid-second. Therefore, Paul could not have written them because structures in his day were considerably looser.

But when we look at how the theologians of the second and third century use the Pastorals, they do not use them to argue for different ways of organising the Church; rather they deploy them in arguments about how to organise society. To take one example, Origen cites the Pastorals to justify his view that the Jesus movement is offering a different, better way of organising the state, the *polis*, under God.

In the 1st and 2nd centuries, Christians didn't question the authorship of the Pastoral Letters – they are universally attributed to Paul; indeed, their authority as sources seems to rest on this. And those theologians find in them arguments about how to live well in the world, rather than how to organise the Church – the very subject I suggest is at the heart of Titus.

Does it matter?

So, where does this leave us? In one sense whether Paul wrote them or not is moot. They are in the canon of the New Testament and have to be addressed as Scripture. Regardless of authorship, how do we read them? Scholarship has tended to focus on the letters as evidence of how the Church understood itself. But as I have argued, what if the letters are more about society than Church? What difference does that make to how we read them? And what bearing does it have on the question of authorship?

Taking it further

For further stimulation, see Timothy Gombis, *Paul: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2010); John Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (SCM, 1976), Richard Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire* (Trinity Press, 1997) and Carla Swafford Works, *The Least of These: Paul and the Marginalized* (Eerdmans, 2020).



For more resources on Paul, see www.rootsforchurches.com/paulsworld2025