

## **PASTORAL IMPERATIVES: PAUL'S USE OF THE IMPERATIVE MOOD IN HIS LETTERS TO TIMOTHY AND TITUS**

**John A. Battle**

In the entire canon of the Bible, there is no part that so explicitly instructs the pastor as Paul's three Pastoral Epistles. Timothy and Titus had accompanied Paul on his mission journeys and had helped him in important ways in his dealings with the churches. They were then established to lead the churches in Ephesus and in Crete. In his later years Paul wrote to them, providing counsel, instruction, encouragement, warning, and directions.<sup>1</sup> Paul's inspired exhortations to these two younger pastors are timeless. After two thousand years we still receive them as God's word. Pastors, in particular, find here the guidelines for being a pastor/theologian, a workman of God, bringing the truth of God to our churches today.

When a new minister is ordained, or a new pastor is installed in a church, very frequently the sermon or the charge to the minister will be taken from the Pastoral Epistles. They provide a wealth of appropriate texts for the occasion. But which of these injunctions are the most important? One way to get a complete picture of Paul's instructions is to examine all the imperative statements in the letters. By looking at all his imperative statements, we see what his emphases were. We see that Paul desired ministers to be pastor/theologians.

There are several ways that a writer could express commands or other imperative ideas. The most common is the imperative mood of the verb. Prohibitions are formed by using the negative particle μή *me* with the present imperative. Another way to express prohibitions is *me* plus the aorist subjunctive.<sup>2</sup> Simple indicatives also could convey the imperative idea, as when Paul might say, "I command, urge, exhort such-and-such."<sup>3</sup> However, the number of simple imperatives far outnumbers these other methods.<sup>4</sup> This article will examine these imperative verb forms in the Pastoral Epistles. By doing this, we should be able to appreciate the importance and emphasis Paul associated with each pastoral duty.

### ***Present and Aorist Imperatives***

Some older grammarians have sought to distinguish from the tenses of imperative verbs the type of action commanded or prohibited.<sup>5</sup> However, a more thorough study of the examples of these constructions in the New Testament has clearly demonstrated that these conclusions are not justified.<sup>6</sup>

Rather, as the modern term "aspect" for the older word "tense" would indicate, these tenses show us the author's view of the action, the way he wants us to think about the action, not necessarily the action itself. It may be that the action prohibited is already in progress, or it may not be in progress; the context has to determine each case.

In general, the aorist tense indicates that the action commanded or prohibited is viewed as a single whole. We frequently find this tense used for commands that are more “one-time” events. For example, when Paul asks Timothy and Titus to greet certain individuals when they receive his letters, he uses the aorist.<sup>7</sup> The aorist does not mean the command is necessarily more urgent,<sup>8</sup> but that it simply is viewed overall, not as a particularly durative or repeated action.

Unlike the aorist, the present tense “looks at the action from an internal viewpoint. It is used for the most part for general precepts—i.e., for habits that should characterize one’s attitudes and behavior—rather than in specific situations.”<sup>9</sup> In the Pastoral Epistles Paul uses the present imperative more frequently than the aorist. In general his commands and prohibitions are permanent injunctions, which were to apply to their entire ministries, as well as to ours.

This table shows how often Paul uses the present and aorist imperative forms in the Pastoral Epistles.

	<b>Pres. Impv.</b>	<b>Aor. Impv.</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1 Tim</b>	41 (95%)	2 (5%)	43
<b>Titus</b>	11 (79%)	3 (21%)	14
<b>2 Tim</b>	17 (52%)	16 (48%)	33
<b>Totals</b>	69 (77%)	21 (23%)	90

Paul uses the present imperative 77% of the time, total. The spread in Titus is about average for these letters. In 1 Timothy Paul nearly always uses the present imperative (95%), perhaps because he is concerned to establish Timothy’s ministry on a permanent foundation. However, in 2 Timothy he uses the aorist much more frequently, perhaps because he is soon to die, and he sees all these commands, both the personal, “punctiliar,” actions as well as more permanent injunctions, in a more immediate light.

### ***Indirect Commands Using the Third Person Imperative***

Greek is unlike English in that it uses a third person imperative (“let him do something”) in addition to the more common second person imperative (“you do something”). When Paul tells Timothy to “let them serve as deacons,”<sup>10</sup> he is commanding, not only that the deacons should meet their qualifications and do their duty, but that Timothy should exert himself to see to it that they indeed meet those qualifications and do that duty. In that sense, the third person imperative is an indirect second person imperative. The person who receives this command is to take appropriate action, to be consistent with the other person’s fulfilling the stated command.

The Pastoral Epistles use the third person imperative sixteen times. Five times these commands are directed to the congregation as a whole: “let no one despise you [Timothy, Titus]” (used twice),<sup>11</sup> “let them [the elders] be honored,”<sup>12</sup> “let our people learn of good works,”<sup>13</sup> and “let everyone abstain from wickedness.”<sup>14</sup> In three of these cases Paul commands the pastors to

conduct themselves and to teach so that the church members will respect and honor them and the elders, and twice to teach the people to live godly lives, separate from the sinful culture.

The other examples of the third person imperative are directed to specific groups within the church. Once he instructs Timothy to “let a woman learn in all submission.”<sup>15</sup> Three times he directs the choosing and responsibilities of deacons: “let these men be tested first,”<sup>16</sup> “let them serve as deacons,”<sup>17</sup> and “let deacons be husbands of one wife.”<sup>18</sup> Four times he gives orders concerning the support of widows: “let them [the families] learn to take care of their widows,”<sup>19</sup> “let not a widow be enrolled,”<sup>20</sup> “let her [younger Christian woman in family] support them,”<sup>21</sup> and “let not the church be burdened.”<sup>22</sup> And three times he directs the activities of church members who are slaves: “let them regard their own masters,”<sup>23</sup> “let them not despise [their masters],”<sup>24</sup> and “let them serve.”<sup>25</sup>

In all these cases, whether addressing the congregation as a whole or groups within the congregation—women, deacons, widows and their families, slaves—the third person imperative is directed to the pastors so that they will teach, instruct, and organize their churches so that all those in the congregation will fulfill their respective duties.

### ***Direct Commands Using the Second Person Imperative***

Paul uses the second person imperative (“you do something”) most frequently, seventy-four times in the Pastoral Epistles. While the third person imperatives address the need to instruct others in their particular duties, the second person indicatives refer primarily to the pastors’ lives and ministries themselves. These imperatives cover a wide area of the pastor’s life and ministry. I have divided them into five different categories: immediate commands, church life, personal life, study, and preaching.

#### **Immediate Commands**

The Pastoral Epistles contain eight examples of Paul’s using the imperative to request or command an immediate particular action on the part of Timothy or Titus. These are grouped at the ends of Titus and 2 Timothy. 1 Timothy contains no such immediate command. He tells Titus to “be diligent to come to me,” to “help Zenas and Apollos on their way,” and to “greet those who love us in faith.”<sup>26</sup> Just before his martyrdom Paul made similar commands to Timothy: “be diligent to come to me,” “bring Mark with you,” “bring the cloak,” “greet Priscilla and Aquila,” and “be diligent to come before winter.”<sup>27</sup>

Since these commands are one-time events, they normally are given in the aorist tense.<sup>28</sup> The six aorist imperatives in this category account for many of those in the Pastoral Epistles. If we remove the eight examples in this category, the aorist imperative is used only 18% of the time in the rest of these letters.

Although these commands are the most time-bound of those in the Pastoral Epistles, they are significant nonetheless. The commands to greet Paul’s friends instruct us in the importance

of maintaining personal contact and friendship within the church, and his personal requests show us the duty of helping one another in the ministry, especially those who are in any kind of need.

## Church Life

There remain sixty-six imperatives in the Pastoral Epistles that can be divided among this and the remaining three categories. However, many of these imperatives are applicable to more than one category. Therefore, I will be including some usages in more than one category, and the total of the four categories will exceed sixty-six.

Twenty-one imperatives in the Pastoral Epistles address the pastor's conduct in the church, the way he lives among the people. Most of these command him to treat particular people or groups of people in the church in a particular manner: "exhort him [an elder],"<sup>29</sup> "honor widows,"<sup>30</sup> "refuse young widows,"<sup>31</sup> "do not receive an accusation against an elder,"<sup>32</sup> "rebuke [the ones sinning],"<sup>33</sup> "do not lay hands [ordain a new elder] quickly" and "do not [thereby] share sins of others,"<sup>34</sup> "command the rich,"<sup>35</sup> "reprove them [sinners like the Cretans] sharply,"<sup>36</sup> "encourage the young men,"<sup>37</sup> "reject a heretic,"<sup>38</sup> "entrust to faithful men,"<sup>39</sup> "reprove, rebuke, exhort [these may be directed to individuals as needed],"<sup>40</sup> and "against whom [Alexander] guard yourself."<sup>41</sup> It can be seen that frequently the ministries of Timothy and Titus concerned their daily contacts with people in their congregations. They were to be pastors at all times, applying the word of God to them as appropriate.

A few of these examples concern the pastor's life in the church in a more general way: "avoid foolish controversies,"<sup>42</sup> "think about what I say [concerning the church supporting the pastor],"<sup>43</sup> "refuse foolish questions,"<sup>44</sup> and "do the work of an evangelist" and "fulfill your ministry."<sup>45</sup> All the imperatives in this category remind pastors that their calling continues all through the week, as they make contact with people in and out of their congregations.

## Personal Life

Not only does Paul instruct pastors concerning their lives in the church, but also in their own personal lives and walk with the Lord. This aspect of the ministry is vital. Paul twenty-three times in these letters commands pastors in this area, notably in his letters to Timothy.

In one case these commands are very practical in nature: "do not drink water" and "use a little wine for your stomach's sake."<sup>46</sup>

Paul commands Timothy to share in his life of suffering for the gospel: "join with me in suffering,"<sup>47</sup> "suffer hardship with [me],"<sup>48</sup> and "endure hardship."<sup>49</sup>

Usually, Paul exhorts the ministers to avoid snares of sin and to live consistently with their preaching: "exercise yourself for godliness,"<sup>50</sup> "be an example for believers,"<sup>51</sup> "be in these things [contents of preaching],"<sup>52</sup> "give attention to yourself and to the teaching" and "remain in them,"<sup>53</sup> "keep yourself free from sin,"<sup>54</sup> "flee these things [love of money and related sins],"<sup>55</sup>

“pursue righteousness,”<sup>56</sup> “fight the good fight of faith” and “take hold of eternal life,”<sup>57</sup> “be strong in the grace,”<sup>58</sup> “avoid worldly empty chatter,”<sup>59</sup> “flee youthful lusts” and “pursue righteousness,”<sup>60</sup> “avoid these [godless] men,”<sup>61</sup> “remain in the things you learned,”<sup>62</sup> “be sober,”<sup>63</sup> and “fulfill your ministry.”<sup>64</sup>

All these imperatives speak to the pastor’s life as a whole. We are to live the gospel we preach, constantly guarding ourselves against sin and people who would lead us into sin. We are to pay attention to our lives, so that they may enhance the gospel testimony, and that we ourselves would be blessed by God.

## Study

Eighteen times in these epistles Paul encourages and commands the pastor, Timothy in this case, to study God’s word and theology, so as to preach truth to the people.

Three times Paul encourages “negative study,” that is, keeping away from false teaching and scholastic distractions: “keep away from foolish myths,”<sup>65</sup> “avoid foolish controversies,”<sup>66</sup> and “refuse foolish questions.”<sup>67</sup> The reason for this caution is emphasized in another imperative, showing what Timothy must be remembering: “know this: difficult times will come.”<sup>68</sup>

The other fourteen examples in this category encourage continual study, to master and guard the teaching Paul committed to him, and to prepare to preach them to the people: “do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you,”<sup>69</sup> “take pains with these things” and “be in these things,”<sup>70</sup> “give attention to yourself and to the teaching” and “remain in them,”<sup>71</sup> “guard what has been committed to you,”<sup>72</sup> “have the pattern of sound words,”<sup>73</sup> “guard the good thing entrusted to you,”<sup>74</sup> “be strong in the grace,”<sup>75</sup> “remember Jesus Christ,”<sup>76</sup> “be diligent to present yourself,”<sup>77</sup> “remain in the things you learned,”<sup>78</sup> “be ready in season, out of season,”<sup>79</sup> and “fulfill your ministry.”<sup>80</sup>

The preaching in the pulpit must be founded on the labor in the study.<sup>81</sup> An effective pastor must first be a sound theologian.

## Preaching

The final category of imperatives in the Pastoral Epistles is that dealing with preaching. I would place thirty-seven examples in this large category. Most of these examples have been included in previous categories as well, especially the categories of church life and of study. Clearly, however, Paul viewed the pulpit ministry as a central task of the ministry.

As with the warnings in the previous section, Paul commands the pastors to resist the temptation to preach on unprofitable subjects: “keep away from foolish myths,”<sup>82</sup> “avoid foolish controversies,”<sup>83</sup> and “refuse foolish questions.”<sup>84</sup> These same three imperatives refer to preaching as well as to study.

Preaching is to be Scripturally based: “pay attention to the [public] reading [of the Scripture].”<sup>85</sup> Paul commands loyalty to the apostolic doctrine: “take pains with these things” and “be in these things,”<sup>86</sup> “give attention to yourself and to the teaching” and “remain in them,”<sup>87</sup> “guard what has been committed to you,”<sup>88</sup> “speak the things that are fitting for sound doctrine,”<sup>89</sup> “have the pattern of sound words,”<sup>90</sup> “guard the good thing entrusted to you,”<sup>91</sup> and “preach the word.”<sup>92</sup> Note also that the three imperatives in 2 Timothy 4:2, “reprove, rebuke, exhort,” are all connected to the phrase “with all longsuffering and doctrine.” Paul clearly expects pastors to preach theologically. The great body of Christian truth contained in the Bible is to be the subject when the pastor ascends the pulpit.

Frequently Paul commands simple instruction in the truth. This is shown in most of the examples quoted in the previous paragraph. In addition, other passages show how Paul wants pastors to encourage and instruct the congregation, or parts of the congregation, in knowledge and in their duties as Christians: “encourage [believers to do these things],”<sup>93</sup> “encourage the young men,”<sup>94</sup> “speak these things” and “encourage,”<sup>95</sup> “remind them to be subject [to rulers],”<sup>96</sup> “entrust [the doctrine] to faithful men,”<sup>97</sup> “remind [them] of these things,”<sup>98</sup> and “do the work of an evangelist.”<sup>99</sup>

Sometimes preaching must be negative, attacking false beliefs and practices, and warning against sin: “rebuke [the ones sinning],”<sup>100</sup> “fight the good fight of faith,”<sup>101</sup> “reprove them [Cretans] sharply,”<sup>102</sup> “reprove with all authority,”<sup>103</sup> and “reprove” and “rebuke.”<sup>104</sup>

This matter of authority in preaching was important to Paul. Timothy, especially, seemed to need this encouragement. In addition to rebuking sin while preaching, other aspects of preaching also need to be done with authority: “command these things” and “teach these things,”<sup>105</sup> “command these things,”<sup>106</sup> “teach these things,”<sup>107</sup> “command the rich,”<sup>108</sup> and “exhort.”<sup>109</sup>

All of a pastor’s ministry must be based on the enabling work of the Holy Spirit, and it is the pastor’s duty to cooperate with that work, and to constantly renew his spiritual strength to preach the gospel: “do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you,”<sup>110</sup> “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus,”<sup>111</sup> “be diligent to present yourself to God,”<sup>112</sup> “be ready in season, out of season,”<sup>113</sup> and “fulfill your ministry.”<sup>114</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Paul’s final letters to Timothy and Titus are the best and most concentrated source of instructions for ministers. Ninety times Paul commands pastors, using the imperative verb. Analysis of these occurrences reveals that, in addition to personal requests made at the time, he addresses their personal lives, their personal contacts with Christians, their studies, and their preaching. He also instructs them to be the conduit for his commands to the believers in their churches. Pastors are to be true pastor/theologians, living, studying, and preaching the faithful apostolic tradition recorded in Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is assuming the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. For a defense of this position, see the accompanying article in this issue of the *WRS Journal* by Dennis W. Jowers, "Observations on the Authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles."

<sup>2</sup> This form is much less frequent than *me* with the present imperative. Daniel B. Wallace notes that of the 50 prohibitions in the NT using one of these two forms, only 10 use the aorist subjunctive, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 724, n. 29. I detected two of these uses in the Pastorals, 1 Tim 5:1, "Do not rebuke an elder," and 2 Tim 1:8, "Do not be ashamed."

<sup>3</sup> For example, 1 Tim 1:3; 2:1. In addition, there is one example in the Pastoral Epistles using the optative mood with *me*, 1 Tim 4:16, "Let it not be counted against them"; here the force is that of a prayer.

<sup>4</sup> I tallied 90 examples of the imperative mood in the Pastoral Epistles. These will be referenced throughout this article.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), 301-302, state categorically, "A prohibition expressed with the *present tense* demands the cessation of some act that is already in progress," while "a prohibition expressed in the *aorist tense* is a warning or exhortation against doing a thing not yet begun" (emphasis theirs). They refer to the famous "barking dog" story involving a grammarian who, while traveling in Greece, heard a barking dog's master command his dog not to bark, using the present indicative. From that clue, and a similar usage found in Plato, he deduced that this grammatical construction in the NT implies the stopping of an action in progress; for the story, see James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Vol. 1 of the 4-vol. set; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906; reprinted 1988), 122.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., the excellent discussion in Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 714-725. My dissertation advisor in postgraduate school, James L. Boyer, was one of the pioneers in this work, as he was involved in the GRAMCORD project, using the new computer technology (this was in the 1970s!) to identify and catalog in a searchable database all the examples of various grammatical forms and constructions in the NT. See his "A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study," *Grace Theological Journal* 8:1 (1987) 35-54. In class he mentioned a counter-example to the barking dog story. When he was in Greece riding a bus he saw inside the bus a Greek sign posted, "Do not be talking to the driver"; it was in the present imperative; however, it certainly did not imply that the passengers were then talking to the driver and had to stop!

<sup>7</sup> Titus 3:15; 2 Tim 4:19.

<sup>8</sup> Boyer, "Classification of Imperatives," 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 721.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Tim 3:10.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:15.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Tim 5:17.

<sup>13</sup> Titus 3:14.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Tim 2:19.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Tim 2:11.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Tim 3:10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Tim 3:12.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Tim 5:4.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Tim 5:9.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Tim 5:16.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Tim 6:1.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Tim 6:2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Titus 3:12, 13, 15.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Tim 4:9, 11, 13, 19, 21.

<sup>28</sup> All are aorist except "bring Mark with you" and "bring the cloak" in 2 Tim 4:11, 13. Perhaps he used the present indicative in those two cases, with the subconscious thought of the planning and preparation necessary to carry out those tasks. These commands could be expanded, "[and while you are coming] be bringing Mark with you," and "[and while you are coming] be bringing the cloak."

<sup>29</sup> 1 Tim 5:1.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Tim 5:3.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Tim 5:11.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Tim 5:19.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Tim 5:20.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Tim 5:22.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Tim 6:17.

<sup>36</sup> Titus 1:13.

<sup>37</sup> Titus 2:6.

<sup>38</sup> Titus 3:10.

<sup>39</sup> 2 Tim 2:2.

<sup>40</sup> 2 Tim 4:2.

<sup>41</sup> 2 Tim 4:15.

<sup>42</sup> Titus 3:9.

<sup>43</sup> 2 Tim 2:7.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Tim 2:23.

<sup>45</sup> 2 Tim 4:5.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Tim 5:23.

<sup>47</sup> 2 Tim 1:8.

<sup>48</sup> 2 Tim 2:3.

<sup>49</sup> 2 Tim 4:5.

<sup>50</sup> 1 Tim 4:7.

<sup>51</sup> 1 Tim 4:12.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Tim 4:15.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Tim 4:16.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Tim 5:22.

<sup>55</sup> 1 Tim 6:11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Tim 6:12.

<sup>58</sup> 2 Tim 2:1.

<sup>59</sup> 2 Tim 2:16.

<sup>60</sup> 2 Tim 2:22.

<sup>61</sup> 2 Tim 3:5.

<sup>62</sup> 2 Tim 3:14.

<sup>63</sup> 2 Tim 4:5.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> 1 Tim 4:7.

<sup>66</sup> Titus 3:9.

<sup>67</sup> 2 Tim 2:23.

<sup>68</sup> 2 Tim 3:1.

<sup>69</sup> 1 Tim 4:14.

<sup>70</sup> 1 Tim 4:15.

<sup>71</sup> 1 Tim 4:16.

<sup>72</sup> 1 Tim 6:20.

<sup>73</sup> 2 Tim 1:13.

<sup>74</sup> 2 Tim 1:14.

<sup>75</sup> 2 Tim 2:1.

<sup>76</sup> 2 Tim 2:8.

<sup>77</sup> 2 Tim 2:15.

<sup>78</sup> 2 Tim 3:14.

<sup>79</sup> 2 Tim 4:2.

<sup>80</sup> 2 Tim 4:5.

<sup>81</sup> My high school debate coach used to tell us, "Debates are won in the study, not on the platform." His debate teams frequently won honors in regional and state competitions.

<sup>82</sup> 1 Tim 4:7.

- <sup>83</sup> Titus 3:9.
- <sup>84</sup> 2 Tim 2:23.
- <sup>85</sup> 1 Tim 4:13.
- <sup>86</sup> 1 Tim 4:15.
- <sup>87</sup> 1 Tim 4:16.
- <sup>88</sup> 1 Tim 6:20.
- <sup>89</sup> Titus 2:1.
- <sup>90</sup> 2 Tim 1:13.
- <sup>91</sup> 2 Tim 1:14.
- <sup>92</sup> 2 Tim 4:2.
- <sup>93</sup> 1 Tim 6:2.
- <sup>94</sup> Titus 2:6.
- <sup>95</sup> Titus 2:15.
- <sup>96</sup> Titus 3:1.
- <sup>97</sup> 2 Tim 2:2.
- <sup>98</sup> 2 Tim 2:14.
- <sup>99</sup> 2 Tim 4:5.
- <sup>100</sup> 1 Tim 5:12.
- <sup>101</sup> 1 Tim 6:12.
- <sup>102</sup> Titus 1:13.
- <sup>103</sup> Titus 2:15.
- <sup>104</sup> 2 Tim 4:2.
- <sup>105</sup> 1 Tim 4:11.
- <sup>106</sup> 1 Tim 5:7.
- <sup>107</sup> 1 Tim 6:2.
- <sup>108</sup> 1 Tim 6:17.
- <sup>109</sup> 2 Tim 4:2.
- <sup>110</sup> 1 Tim 4:14.
- <sup>111</sup> 2 Tim 2:1.
- <sup>112</sup> 2 Tim 2:15.
- <sup>113</sup> 2 Tim 4:2.
- <sup>114</sup> 2 Tim 4:5.