

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presented in a TED Talk¹ the importance of not classifying a people, a person, a nation, or a situation based on a single story. When we work from a single story, a single way of seeing something, we miss out on the complexity and diversity that is before us. Ms. Adichie said when she came to the United States to study at university her roommate was surprised that she spoke excellent English. Turns out English is the official language of Nigeria. Her roommate was also surprised to learn that her favorite music was Mariah Carey and not something set to log drums. Her roommate was operating from a single story about Africa as presented in wildlife magazines and programs like Wild Kingdom.

To summarize her talk, it is easy to believe that when we repeatedly hear that a person is poor we tend to think only of their poverty rather than their talents. We think poor means no abilities. Also where we start a story makes a difference in how it is interpreted and understood. Do we start a story about the United States with the bows and arrows of the Native Americans or with the coming of the British or the French or the Spanish? When we make assumptions based on a single story we miss out on the depth and breadth of the world we are attempting to categorize.

As I reflected on her comments, I found that I had developed a single story about the Pastoral Letters also known as First and Second Timothy and the Book of Titus. These letters are called the Pastoral Letters as they are addressed to two pastors, Timothy and Titus. In all honesty I have not been drawn to these epistles or their message, even though they are part of the New Testament. My rationale was that biblical scholars question the authorship of these letters and for me part of their message is inconsistent with other books of the New Testament.

In the book The First Paul, the authors Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, suggest that based on writing style, sentence structure, vocabulary and the material contained in these letters that they were not written by Paul even though the introduction to each says Paul is the writer.² In our day and age to write in the name of another would result in charges of plagiarism or libel. But during the first and second centuries, as well as during biblical times, to write in the name of your teacher was a common practice. It was considered a way to honor one's teacher and one's teacher's teachings. A good example of this is the Book of Isaiah, which scholars tell us was written over a 150 year span. Scholars have deduced that three prophets, working in Isaiah's name, shared God's message with Israel.

If Paul were the author of the Pastoral Letters they would have been in circulation around 60 CE. However, there is a growing school of thought that dates these letters from 100 to 120 CE, long after Paul's death.

There are parts of the First Letter to Timothy that are quite unsettling. In particular those verses that admonish women to remain silent, to refrain from teaching who are told they show their faithfulness by having families.³ Barefoot and pregnant, working in the kitchen is the image that comes to mind and it makes me shudder. The letter also

calls for slaves to honor and respect their masters just because their masters are members of the church.⁴ This is a condoning of slavery that is hard to grasp.

Such teachings about women and slaves are not consistent with Paul's words found in the seven letters scholars agree were actually written by Paul. These letters are Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon.⁵ Paul is hard enough to understand without adding ideas that are counter to Paul's basic teachings, even if they are offered in Paul's name. Paul was not into maintaining the status quo, which these verses are all about. They support the running of households according to traditional Roman customs, where the man of the house is the unchallenged head of the household.

So with these conflicts in mind, I formed a single story about these letters. In my single story these letters were to be ignored. But the request to talk about Timothy forced me to take a second look at these letters. And in so doing I discovered they contain some jewels worth holding onto.

As I was reading First Timothy and Titus, it struck me that fake news is not new news. The better part of the Letters warn against falling prey to those teachings fostered by fake news. In the first letter, Timothy is charged with helping the faithful in Ephesus avoid being sucked in by those who have not just a different interpretation of the Gospel but to avoid those teachings that offer a highly inaccurate understanding of God, Jesus, and the teachings of the faith. The letter makes it very clear that those spreading teachings to abstain from marriage or to abstain from certain foods are spreading fake teachings. I am sure you can all think of a bit of fake news or bad teachings today that has torn churches apart.

First Timothy also presents a system of order or hierarchy for the church. Working within the culture of the day, we are given a picture of a church structure consistent with the orderly running of a traditional Roman household. There is a caretaker or householder, who is called a bishop or a deacon within the church. Each member of the household has their given tasks and responsibilities that keep the household running in good order. The expectation that each member of the faith community has a responsibility to support the church and to use their gifts to foster the mission of the church is consistent with our affirmation to support the church with our prayers, service, gifts, presence and our witness.

The letter also speaks to the qualifications and lifestyle expected of bishops to ensure that right order and right teachings are maintained. The leaders of the church are meant to be living examples of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Although some of the qualifications listed are open to interpretation. There is an admonition for bishops to be married and married only once. However, it is unknown if that means they are to have only one spouse and not two, or if it means they should not be divorced.

Another area that is as relevant to today as it was in Timothy's time is the concern for wealth. The letter calls money the root of all kinds of evil.⁶ Rather than seeking worldly wealth we are to be content with what we have and to seek to be rich in good works. This does not jive 100% with Wesley's view that we are to earn all we can, save all we can so we can give all we can. It is consistent with the view that we are not to be consumed by money, making money or wealth our idol.

Personally I think Timothy has been given an enormous task. The closing of the first letter sums up Timothy's role, "to guard what has been entrusted to him, which is the faith community and the settling of the faith community into the culture while avoiding profane chatter and contradictions from false knowledge."⁷ Timothy's task is to ferret out and eliminate the bad teachings, encourage his flock to live as faithful disciples and to do so with irreproachable behavior. He is not to give into youthful passions and is to fight the good fight having faith and a good conscience by rejecting those who would shipwreck the faith⁸ and to do so in love by staying on the path of righteousness, godliness, faith, love endurance, and gentleness.⁹ This is a tall order for anyone, let alone one so young. So what do we know about Timothy?

To gather a picture of Timothy we need to read the Book of Acts as well as several other letters in the New Testament. From these readings we are able to glean that Timothy was born in the city of Lystra in Asia Minor, now part of modern day Turkey. His father was a Gentile and his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice were followers of the Way of Jesus. Paul met Timothy while traveling through Lystra.¹⁰ Members of the faith community in Lystra had high praise for the work Timothy had been doing. So Paul invited Timothy to join him in his travels, learning and sharing the gospel in each place Paul ventured.¹¹ Paul so trusted Timothy and was so confident in his ability to faithfully live and share the Gospel that he eventually sent him on his own to help support and report back about the activities of the churches started in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica and Ephesus.

We know Timothy was young because in the letter the author tells Timothy to "let no one despise your youth but set an example in speech and conduct in love, in faith and in purity."¹² He is urged to use his gifts of reading of scripture, preaching and teaching to help the faithful remain faithful. How old Timothy was at the beginning or the end of his ministry is unknown. We do not know the name of his father, whether he had brothers or sisters, or where he was educated and if he had learned a trade.

Despite his youthfulness, Timothy went willingly to Ephesus to help move the church Paul shepherded for three years back to the true teachings of the faith. Ephesus was a place where things happened. It was a bustling seaport, a major center of commerce and the Roman capital city in Asia Minor. As a port town the city attracted people of all walks of life and from all parts of the known world. The city was the home of a great temple to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, wildlife, and childbirth. When Paul was in Ephesus craftsmen who made charms and other memorabilia honoring Artemis rioted

out of fear that Paul's teachings and the spread of the gospel would put them out of business.¹³ Today, the temple ruins are listed among the Seven Wonders of the World.

So while the Pastoral Letters may not be part of our daily lexicon, they do offer some valuable lessons for any faith community. First we should test any teachings to ensure they do not fall into the fake news category. Do the teachings being espoused help us grow in our love of God and our love of neighbor or do they separate us in some way? Do the teachings being espoused help us and those within the community grow in the fruits of the Spirit or do they diminish the quality of life in some way?

Second. Are we so consumed by wealth, or any other temptation of modern life, that we fail to put God and God's work in the world first in our lives?

Third. Are we living as good examples of what it means to be a disciples of Jesus Christ, supporting the mission of the church, sharing the gospel message in word, deed and thoughts? Is our faith, our theology, our ethics rooted in the gospel and faithfully lived everyday?

Fourth. The call to ministry and faithful living has no age restrictions. And, fifth, just as in Timothy's time the church today is challenged to find solid footing in a culture that puts little emphasis on church and to be able to find that footing without letting go of our basic principles.

And so from a deeper reading of First Timothy we learn there is more than one story to be told. There is always something to be learned even if we don't agree with everything presented. Are we willing to explore and learn, to go deeper in our understanding of our faith? Or are we inclined to want to put limits on God, keeping God in a box so that the story we tell to the nations is one that makes us feel good rather than one that carries the message of God's love and mercy and grace for all. Amen

¹ Ted Talk, "Chimananda Ngozi Adichie," accessed online 18 July 2018 @ https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

² *The First Paul*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, (New York; Harper Collins, 2009), 14.

³ 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

⁴ 1 Timothy 6:1-2

⁵ *First Paul*, 14.

⁶ 1 Timothy 6:10

⁷ 1 Timothy 6:20

⁸ 1 Timothy 1:18-20.

⁹ 1 Timothy 6:11

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 1:5

¹¹ Acts 16:1

¹² 1 Timothy 4:12-14.

¹³ Acts 19:21-41.