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## **What Was the False Teaching Opposed by the Pastoral Letters?**

All three Pastoral Letters exhibit concern to correct false teaching in the church (1 Tim. 1:3–7; 4:1–3, 7; 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 2:14, 16–18, 25–26; 3:6–9; 4:3–4; Titus 1:9–16). Who are the false teachers, and what do they teach?

Second Timothy gives us the most specific information: two men, Hymenaeus and Philetus, are teaching that “the resurrection has already taken place” (2 Tim. 2:17–18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:12; 2 Thess. 2:1–3); a third man, Alexander the coppersmith, has strongly opposed Paul’s teaching and caused him “great harm” (2 Tim. 4:14). We hear of a Hymenaeus and an Alexander (same one?) in 1 Timothy also (1 Tim. 1:20; cf. Acts 19:33). Still, the problems that have arisen may go beyond specific concerns attributable to these individuals. There are references to “myths” (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14), “genealogies” (1 Tim. 1:4; Titus 3:9), and “quarrels about the law” (Titus 3:9; cf. 1 Tim. 1:7–11; 4:3–4). In one instance we hear of people who “forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods” (1 Tim. 4:3).

One possibility is that some form of Jewish asceticism was being touted in Christian communities: believers were being encouraged by Jews or Jewish Christians (see 1 Tim. 1:7; Titus 1:10, 14) to keep

ritual purity laws and, perhaps, to go beyond these by remaining celibate and making other strict lifestyle choices. The Pastoral Letters respond by insisting that the law is for those who don't know the gospel (1 Tim. 1:8–11), that all things created by God are good and may be received with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4), and that “to the pure all things are pure” (Titus 1:15).

Many scholars would go further: the ideas resisted in the Pastoral Letters bear resemblance to second-century gnosticism. The First Letter to Timothy refers specifically to people who profess “what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20; cf. Titus 1:16a), and gnostics claimed to be the recipients of secret, revealed knowledge (the Greek word *gnōsis*, from which “gnosticism” takes its name, means “knowledge”). Gnostics also despised material aspects of reality, often insisting on extreme asceticism: the line “to the pure all things are pure” (Titus 1:15) would have made an excellent anti-gnostic slogan. Many gnostic groups kept track of elaborate genealogies for various divine beings, tracing angels, spirits, and the gods of other religions back to some transcendent, universal deity. Thus the false teaching opposed in the Pastoral Letters may have involved a mixture of ideas, some drawn from Jewish circles and others drawn from what would later be known as gnosticism.