CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE SINNERS”: SOTERIOLOGY IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES*

INTRODUCTION

The above quotation of 1 Tim 1:15 could stand as a short formula for NT soteriology in general.¹ On the face of it, there is nothing really exceptional about it, and the soteriology of the Pastoral Epistles (henceforth PE) has, until recently, generally shared in the low esteem in which other theological aspects of the letters have been held.² One commentator’s assessment is representative of many others. A.T. Hanson considers the author of the letters unoriginal, dependent on traditions, including liturgical and hymnic formulas, which he presents without working them into a consistent whole. So, for example, the author of the PE describes both God and Christ as Savior, the reason being that he “expresses his doctrine of Christ by using titles for him rather than by expounding an ontological and soteriological theory.”³ The author was not only not conscious of the implications of the traditions he used, “One cannot help suspecting that Paul’s profound doctrine of the cross was simply too deep for the author of the Pastorals.”⁴

Overview of the Soteriology of the Pastoral Epistles

The soteriology of the PE can easily be outlined as is done below. That is not to say that it is equally easy to discern whether the individual elements

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³ Anthony T. Hanson, The Pastoral Epistles (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 39.

⁴ Hanson, Pastoral Epistles, 42.
dealing with salvation cohere in a systematic whole, or, absent such coherence, whether any particular element dominates or any theme pervades the letters. Often, the doctrine in the PE is made to suffer by comparing it negatively with Paul's teaching on salvation, and even a rapid survey reveals that we have to do with a mélange of Pauline and non-Pauline elements.

According to the PE, God wants all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:4; 4:10), but focuses on those who have believed (1 Tim 4:10). God is named Savior (1 Tim 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3), as is Jesus Christ (2 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6), and it is not immediately clear what the role of each is in the salvation of mankind.

The theology of the PE is fundamentally theocentric. God is concerned with the salvation of all people, and he allowed his saving grace to appear in Christ. It is claimed that the PE subordinate Christology to an epiphany scheme (see below), so that it loses its soteriological independence and merely fills a functional role in a system of salvation that preserves the total transcendence of God. According to this view, soteriology has returned to the doctrine of God, which means that the Christ event, stripped of its own import, now merely has the function of announcing God’s universal scheme of salvation.

There is, however, much more to the soteriology of the letters than could be inferred from this characterization. The heretofore prevailing view, that there is no cogent, systematic theology in the PE, but that the author uses pre-Pauline, Pauline, and other material in a sometimes haphazard way for different purposes, has recently been challenged. It has been argued, for instance, that, while the Christological statements in the PE do not cohere in a closely-knit conception, there is a unifying theme, namely soteriology, that unites them. Indeed, a summary of the soteriology of the PE can begin with the observation that the PE present Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between God the Savior and mankind,

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5 Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus*, 363–365.
6 Victor Hasler, “Epiphanie und Christologie in den Pastoralbriefen,” *TZ* 33 (1977): 197, 202–203. Also see Donelson, *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles*, 139: “Jesus receives the title savior only in the midst of descriptions of the plan of salvation and only when the effects of his epiphany are being described. In fact, the three major passages in the Pastorals which paint the details of the salvation schema, the cosmological side of the οἰκονομία θεοῦ, are 2 Tim 1:9–10; Titus 2:11–14; and Titus 3:4–7.”
7 The thorough analysis by Hans Windisch, “Zur Christologie der Pastoralbriefe” *ZNW* 34 (1935): 213–238, has been the most influential presentation of the evidence in support of this argument.