

# A HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SITUATION IN EPHESUS IN RELATION TO WOMEN

By

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Paul's comments about women in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy chapter 2 are, in and of themselves, misogynistic, prejudiced, and violate egalitarian principles put forward in other Pauline literature; but by recreating the contemporary worldviews of Paul's day we may be able explain this apparent contradiction. The powerful emotions that gender based vocations arouse in people color their exegesis. For example, feminists do not accept these verses as authoritative, whereas a male chauvinist uses 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy as the hallmark of his philosophy. These positions do not seek find the author's original intent but rather to have their worldview inserted unnaturally into the text. If we want to know the author's original intent we must demystify the text by crossing the barriers that separate us from the author's thought process. The barriers of time, culture, distance, and language can be diminished if we examine the text retrieving the historical-cultural background. By doing so we see Paul was attempting to counteract the effects of a popular heresy. This heresy is not only a one-time occurrence but also rather a particular religious persuasion that has produced predictable results throughout the church's history. Paul's situation may have been unique but the evil he sought to destroy has consistently reappeared and produced similar results as that which occurred in Ephesus.

There are several clues in the text that give us hints as to what problems needed to be solved in the Ephesian church. Gordon Fee reasons that a heresy had arisen (Fee, 1991, pg 55). Fee deciphers the heresy had elements of exclusivism due to Paul's seemingly unwarranted mention that Christ died for all and wants all to be saved (1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:4-6) (Fee, 1991, pg 57). It is likely

that Paul was addressing a heresy that was an early frontrunner to the Calvinist doctrine of Limited Atonement. A first century alternative to this “New Doctrine” was Gnosticism. The Gnostics were extreme fatalists; they dismissed free will and taught that humanity's salvation could not be effected by choice. Again, we can see the early traits of Calvinism in the teaching. It would be a logical step between God not wanting to save some and Christ not dying for all people. There are further clues in the text that Paul was chastising Gnostic teaching:

1. In 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 1:4 Paul advises against studying “fables and endless genealogies”. The Church Fathers believed the studying of speculative genealogies to be a Gnostic characteristic. (Twomey, 2009, pg 19)
2. 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:4 instructs his author to come to “*knowledge of the Truth*”. The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word γνωσις (Lindell, 2003, pg 144) meaning *knowledge*. Here Paul is using a pun, for he uses ἐπίγνωσις meaning *full knowledge* (Lindell, 2003, pg 249). He also qualifies ἐπίγνωσις with *truth*, hence emphasizing that the Gnostic's knowledge was false and should be abandoned for true and full knowledge.
3. 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:5 emphasizes there is one Mediator between God and man. This declaration of Christ as mediator is uniquely Pauline (if Paul wrote Hebrews). In this instance it seems out of place. Augustine, a former Gnostic, taught there were two mediators between man and God, one being Christ and the other being sin (Twomey, 2009, pg 39). It may be that Augustine was attempting to Christianize a pagan doctrine he was familiar with. Augustine was also a fatalist, who prescribed to limited atonement (Twomey, 2009, pg 13). It is noteworthy that a former Gnostic disavowed two major tenets of one chapter of 1 Timothy.

4. Most Gnostics practiced asceticism, so it is unlikely they would need to be warned on appropriate attire as Paul does in 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:9. History, however, provides a window to the behavior of the Gnostics of Paul's day. Irenaeus tells us of the sexually promiscuous behavior of Gnostic leaders, who were particularly attracted to the best-dressed and wealthiest women (Logan, 2004, pg 177). It is conceivable that women were dressing provocatively in order to attract Gnostic leaders. In order to gain acceptance into this exclusive sect the women were likely attracting the male leadership with ornate dress.
5. 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:11-12 tells women to be silent in Church and forbids them to teach men. In Tertullian's critique of the Gnostics he mentions women's predominance in the church, that they were "bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures—it may be even to baptize. Their ordinations, are carelessly administered, capricious, changeable" (Tertullian, Chap 41) . The fact that women adopted preaching duties builds the case that Paul was referring to a specific problem and group.
6. In an apparent justification for diminishing women's authority, Paul relies on Genesis to establish a hierarchy based on birth order. Yet I propose that 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:13-14 is in response to Gnostic teaching. The Gnostic creation accounts differs drastically from the Biblical account. For example, in one of the Gnostic creation accounts Eve brings Adam to life and then instructs him (Pagels, 1989, pg 31). I propose the Gnostics were teaching that women had authority to enlighten based on their version of the creation account. Paul was not telling women to be silent in Church, but rather retorting how women do not have authority based on the Genesis account. Paul was smart enough to realize that being created first was not a stamp of authority. If it were, a fish would hold greater authority

than humanity. Paul counteracts such nonsense by telling us “For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” 1 Cor 11:12

7. Paul's controversial statement on childbirth is difficult to elucidate, but through the light of Gnostic doctrine certain elements are illuminated. The Gnostics believed that children were born evil and procreation “ increased the number subjected to evil angels,” hence sex and procreation were wicked (Yamauchi, 2004, pg 31). These dogmas were later synchronized into Church teaching via St. Augustine (Khan, 1990, pg 58-59). St. Augustine promulgated the principle that sex was wrong and children were inherently evil in the Church. It is likely Paul was referring to an early form of this teaching. This is further evidenced by the later passage 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 4:3, where Paul mentions a demonic sect that “forbids marriage”. I propose that Paul's strange statement in 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:15 was a call to repentance. The women of Ephesus had likely become anti-procreation due to their Gnostic indoctrination. Paul was calling them to repentance by instructing the women to abandon this doctrine by practicing the alternative. Hence, the women were not saved by childbirth but rather by their practical repentance, which in this case was childbirth.

These elements show that Paul was compiling a vice list, not just moral failings but theological also. The evidence for Gnostic infiltration of the Ephesian Church is compelling. We can safely say that Paul's writing was responding to a unique situation, but this is by no means culturally limited. Elements of Gnostic teaching and their practical ministerial outcomes have plagued Church history. Hence, while 1<sup>st</sup> Tim cannot be understood without the historical cultural background, once understood it provides absolute and timeless principles.

Many Christian denominations use this text to prohibit women entering into certain ministerial roles, but was that the spirit in which Paul wrote it? The evidence that Paul was addressing the

Gnostics is ample; hence the true spirit of this letter is to guide the deceived from their heretical practices. The fact that one justifies sexism with a letter intended to counteract a doctrine of exclusivism is egregious indeed. Timothy had a specific calling over his life (1<sup>st</sup> Tim 1:18-19); Irenaeus taught that this was defending the church “against the madness of the Gnostics” (Twomey, 2009, pg 112). Paul instructs Timothy to *recall* the individuals who had departed from the faith (v 18), but follows such a noble task with the brutal methods needed to achieve such ends. (v. 20). The verses in question are the stringent methods Paul wants Timothy to execute to lead the Ephesians to practical repentance.

It would be erroneous to dismiss 1<sup>st</sup> Tim 2:9-15 as belonging to a specific period. One of the major problems the Gnostics fabricated was disunity among genders; the idea that one gender was superior in some respects due to a certain spin on scripture. Gnostic-like gender prejudice is present in the Church today. In Paul's day abrogation of Biblical texts led to an unnatural elevation in women's ministerial roles, yet elevating male roles by the same process has been the prevalent practice throughout Church history. Gordon Fee reasoned that an exclusive dogma similar to limited atonement permeated the Ephesians' Church. The doctrines of exclusivism, the belief that one group is superior to another by virtue of elements out of their control (such as race, gender or divine declaration) would likely produce prejudice. In religious terms, the teaching that you are a member of an exclusive group that the preponderance of humanity are banned from seems to be prejudice by definition. This is apparent in the modern church. Recent studies show that those who ascribe to the doctrine of limited atonement are thirteen times more likely to endorse a patriarchal dogma than those who hold to egalitarian ministerial roles (Horton, 2009, pg 79). It cannot be escaped that the practice of teaching that salvation is closed to all but an exclusive minority is tied to sexism in practical ecclesiastical duties. 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy can

function as a guide against these ideas as it was written in the spirit of defeating sexual discrimination. But in seeking to route out the modern equivalents to ancient heresy we must recognize Paul's strategy: a change of mind is not sufficient, but practical symbols of repentance must be adopted.

If we ask “What principle did Paul wish to communicate in his writing?” we will force others to plunge into understanding the world Paul inhabited. By doing so we can show that Paul was not endorsing a timeless ethic of misogyny, but rather speaking against manipulating the scriptures in order to promote one gender above another. But this alone is not a complete case. It is not enough to disprove by exegeting potentially prejudiced verses. We must construct a positive case. If we read Pauline literature horizontally, we see that verses like Gal 3:28 promote equality between sexes. We also see Paul named his “sister Phoebe a deacon of the church in Cenchreae” Rom 16:12. Paul was not opposed to female leadership, or he would hardly request the Roman Church to “receive her in the Lord”. We can also use appeal to relevant biblical arguments; Peter's teaching in Acts 10:47 promotes the ideal that the Holy Spirit works through all people, and Peter accepts those of a different people group based on the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Could we apply similar criteria to women in ministry? No one can deny that women have done incredible work for God. Can we say that God did not lead female pioneers such as Deacon Phoebe, St Teresa of Avila, Mother Teresa, Lillian Trasher, Gladys Aylward or countless others whom history have neglected but heaven recalls? To develop change within our ministry context we can promote correct hermeneutical principles. For example, we must attempt to discover what the Biblical writer was saying, recreating the world they inhabited. We must follow their lead with respect to female leadership, and adopt the criteria for recognizing divine approval as Peter did.

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