

22 1 Timothy. Merry News for Widows: You May Remarry!

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1. Widows: Women and Poverty. 1 Timothy mentions no women by name, but their leadership in the early churches is emphasized, since only here in the New Testament do we find a lengthy section devoted to the order of widows (5:3-16). Such women, independent of the patriarchal households, consecrated themselves to Christian ministry, but needed economic assistance from the churches. Paul himself had counseled that widows should not remarry (1

Corinthians 7:8-9), since he apparently expected Christ's second coming shortly (7:26, 29-31). 1 Timothy, to the contrary, counsels remarriage, especially for young widows (1 Tim. 5:11-15), to avoid having the church become overburdened economically with the support of too many widows. Here again we see that the Bible does not offer universal "ethics" or "morals" but wise counsel reflecting concrete and distinct historical contexts.

On the other hand, 1 Timothy teaches that to be enrolled on the list of widows supported economically by the church, one requirement was to have been married only once (5:9). However, this would make it impossible for a remarried young widow who was widowed again to be supported by the church. As in the case of widows of Hellenic households in Jerusalem, for whom the church instituted the order of deacons (Acts 6:1-7), the widows' poverty makes it evident that this condition was particularly common in the case of women (see the poor, widows and orphans in the Hebrew Scriptures, and Yahweh's wrath against their oppressors, Exodus 22:21-24).

A related concern in 1 Timothy is tranquillity in community and public life (2:2) and that prayers for all humans be expressed in peaceful worship, without interruptions caused by fighting between the men (2:8) or by women determined to correct their husbands publicly during worship (2:9-15). Recognizing that when we speak we are not listening, 1 Timothy insists that the most profound worship occurs in moments of quietness, when we wait silently and listen to the Holy Spirit (2:2, 11-12; cf. James 1:19). In the Christian tradition the Quakers have most developed this "sacrament of silence." The tranquillity/silence that 1 Timothy recommends for women (2:11-12; see 1 Peter 3:4) is also indicated as a norm for all, men included (1 Tim. 2:2; see 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:12; the same Greek root can even indicate Sabbath rest, Luke 23:56).

The “submission” that 1 Timothy recommends to wives (2:11) is also a responsibility of husbands (Ephesians 5:21, 25-33). However, the prohibition against women teaching men (1 Tim. 2:12) differs from Paul’s teaching. In his own letters Paul recognized and accepted women who, with all liberty, prophesied (1 Corinthians 11:5) and taught (Philippians 4:2-3), and traveled as “apostles” (Junia in Romans 16:7; see also Prisca, 16:3; Acts 18:26). Even John Calvin acknowledged that 1 Timothy’s argument to support the prohibition of women teaching men (Adam’s creation prior to Eve in Genesis 2) was not convincing since John the Baptist came before Jesus but had less authority (and the animals were created before humans in Genesis 1!)

The conclusion of the argument in 1 Timothy 2:15 also is quite problematic since many women are saved without ever marrying or having children, and the Scriptures--especially Paul--insist that we are saved through faith and not by works. 1 Timothy here may speak with casual hyperbole, not meant to be taken literally, to refute those who prohibited marriage (4:3). In other words, a woman need not be a virgin nor abstain from sexual relations in order to be saved, but we should not suppose that every Christian woman is going to marry and have children.

2. The Affluent and the Oppressed Poor. 1 Timothy takes a less radical position than Paul’s own letters and Jesus’ praxis, not only regarding liberation and equality for women, but also regarding the poor and the wealthy. The letter reflects a situation in which more affluent people had joined the churches in Ephesus (see the women with costly attire, 2:9-10) but were still a minority in communities where most were poor and vulnerable (widows, 5:3 -16; slaves under a “yoke,” 6:1 -2, etc.). Timothy is exhorted to address the affluent boldly, underscoring the spiritual danger of money (“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” 6:10), and also to insist on solidarity and generosity with the poor (6:17-19; 2:10). Because of these texts 1 Timothy, along with the other pastorals, has been deprecated as “bourgeois,” deviating seriously from Jesus’ and Paul’s radical teaching and praxis.

The New Testament consistently insists on expressions of solidarity with the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. However, the documents, given their diverse historical contexts, reflect considerable variety regarding specifics. In Q, our earliest source for Jesus' teaching (ca. 60 AD), solidarity with the poor is expressed in the lifestyle of itinerant prophets who were homeless. Mark, our earliest Gospel (ca. 70 AD), addresses communities of disciples in stable households, but still exalts Jesus' radical demand that a rich young man leave everything in order to become a disciple (Mark 10:17-31). Luke preserves this radical tradition (18:18-30), but then immediately counterbalances it (for his more affluent churches) with the paradigm of the rich Zaccheus, who only gave half of his belongings when he became Jesus' disciple (19:1-10; cf. Acts: a primitive communism, Paul's Q-style itinerancy qualified by his tentmaking, etc.).

1 Timothy represents a further accommodation, exhorting the rich simply to be generous, demonstrating a degree of solidarity, without specifying this more precisely. Nevertheless, a church composed primarily of the poor (widows, slaves, and deacons who help the poor) and with only a small minority of rich, (who are generous and show solidarity with the poor), should not be deprecated as a "bourgeois" church. We may observe this same diversity of historical contexts and teachings in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. the Hebrew slaves of the Exodus with the moderate teaching of Proverbs). Again, the Bible does not offer universal "morals" or "ethics" but how to walk in wisdom, guided by teachings reflecting diverse historical contexts but also with historical continuity in its norms of liberation/freedom, justice and love in solidarity. Avoiding foolish and cruel expressions of asceticism, 1 Timothy stands in continuity with the Hebrew Bible, opposing those who forbid marriage (4:3) and emphasizes the goodness of God's entire creation (4:3-5; 6:17; see Genesis 1; Song of Songs).

Even more than Titus, 1 Timothy is concerned with the structures and government of the churches, representing a further step in the process of institutionalization (--> Titus and the effect

on the poor). Titus speaks of the churches in Crete directed by a body of “elders/ presbyters” who had oversight functions (Titus 1:5-9). 1 Timothy, however, speaks of elders (plural) in Ephesus, but with a “supervisor/president/bishop,” perhaps one member, chosen by them (3:1-7; 4:14; 5:17-22). 1 Timothy also speaks of deacons and orders of “deaconesses” (3:11) and widows (5:3-16). For 1 Timothy, the church is “the household of...the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (3:15), which replaces the patriarchal family as the foundation of society. This household of God is the fruit of Jesus’ radical Good News (3:16; 1:12-17). 1 Timothy adapts its teaching to a later context (see the conduct of women, slaves, and the rich), but seeks to maintain and strengthen the new counterculture structures in the face of false teachers who sought to undermine them. Considered in isolation, 1 Timothy’s adaptations may seem to be ill-advised political compromises, but interpreted as part of a more radical canon, we may recognize a certain wisdom in the diversity and the dialectic.

3. Liberating Justice, Law and Judaism In continuity with the Exodus paradigm of the Hebrew Bible, 1 Timothy views justice primarily from the perspective of the oppressed as liberating justice. Thus Jesus, a victim of cruel injustice, oppression and the violence of the crucifixion, experienced his resurrection as liberating justice (“justified/vindicated by the Spirit,” 1 Tim. 3:16; see HCSB note). Similarly, since Moses’ Law prohibited violence and oppression of the weak, it is superfluous for the person whose praxis is already characterized by liberating justice and solidarity with the weak and poor (1:8-11). And Timothy in his own ministry is exhorted to flee the self-indulgent lifestyle typical of wealthy oppressors and to pursue liberating justice (6:11; see Matt. 5:6, 10-12). Throughout the letter, this liberating justice is complemented with frequent exhortation to good works as expressions of solidarity with the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed (2:10; 3:2; 5:8-10 [note thlībo, oppress/afflict, v. 10], 16, 25; 6:2, 18). In Paul’s own letters (Romans, Galatians) we may observe a

critical/dialectic posture in terms of the law (Torah). In Galatians and Romans Paul teaches that Christians are “free” from the law (Gal. 5; Rom. 7), since the law functions negatively to convict of sin, enabling us to see our need of the Gospel and of salvation by grace and faith alone. In Galatians Paul refers to “the fruit of the Spirit,” not obedience to the law (Gal. 5:19-23). 1 Timothy 1:8-11, however, reformulates #5-9 of the 10 Commandments into a vice list (a genre popular in the Greco-Roman literature) that specifies 14 vices. In this list the fourth commandment (concerning work and sabbath rest) does not appear (but see rest/tranquillity in 2:2, 11-12 --> 1-2 Thessalonians).

4. Sexual Sins or Sexual Minorities? Although 1 Timothy mentions no women by name, five men are named: Paul, Timothy, and Jesus Christ (1:1-2, unmarried), Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20; unmarried?), and Pontius Pilate (6:13, married, cf. Matthew 27:19) --> 2 Timothy. In 1 Timothy’s vice list (1:10) the seventh commandment (prohibition of adultery), becomes a prohibition of prostitution/sexual misbehavior (Greek: *pornois*) and also of “bed-males” (Greek: *arsenokoitais*, from *koíte*, “bed,” here a euphemism for sexual intercourse, and *’arsen*, male[s]).

Since 1946, when the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament was published, this term frequently has been mistranslated as “homosexuals.” Although a rare word whose precise meaning has long been disputed, obviously it is formed from two simple and common words: male[s] + bed. It is also clear that “bed” here is not literal but instead has a metaphorical sense signifying some type of sexual activity (see the negative use of “beds” alone in Romans 13:13 and the positive reference to the marriage “bed” in Hebrews 13:4). The position of “bed-males” in 1 Timothy 1:10 helps us determine the meaning, since it occurs between a reference to unjust and irresponsible sexual behavior (Greek: *pornois*) and another word which signifies “slave-traders.” The translation of “bed-males” as “homosexual” is inadmissible, since

“homosexual” is a word invented towards the end of the nineteenth century with reference to the new understanding of “sexual orientation,” a modern scientific concept. Moreover, “homosexual” includes women of this orientation, lesbians, and does not necessarily imply any sexual activity. Heterosexual and bisexual men could involve themselves in the slave trade and prostitution that 1 Timothy may have in view. “Bed-males” in 1 Timothy 1:10 apparently views as a vice male-male anal sexual relations (without condoms) that involved exploitation, oppression, and abuse, probably related to the purchase/kidnapping of boys for use in male prostitution.¹ However, terms in vice lists commonly lack legal precision, since they are used rhetorically to denounce enemies (in modern English see vulgar male denunciations of “cock-suckers” and “mother-fuckers”). To take such a vulgar term of abuse and seek to exegete it literally with legal precision (“persons --or only males?--of homosexual orientation who engage in any expression of same-gender sexual relations”) is ludicrous. The only other use of arsenokoitai in the New Testament is by Paul himself, where its use with a related term may suggest a somewhat different connotation --> 1 Corinthians 6:9.

Bibliography: 1 Timothy (see also above under Pastoral Letters)

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