

## **“But women will be saved through childbearing”**

### **Reflection 29 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”**

One of the great classic texts over which gender debate is still waged in some churches in our time is 1 Timothy 2:1-15. It ends with a salvation claim that “women will be saved through childbearing if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” which raises a lot of questions and in truth no absolutely clear answers. Does this text mean that this is how women make it to heaven? Or does it maybe refer to women being saved spiritually, as some think, through the most significant birth of all – Christ’s? Or does it refer to women being kept safe, physically safe, in childbirth? Commentary and translation and interpretation are all over the place on this. As usual, we have to look at the context to get any sense of this. We have to go back to verses 11-12.

So we are going to set aside verse 15 for a while and check out its context, specifically what Paul writes in verses 11-12 – that a woman should learn in quietness and submission, that a woman should not teach or have authority over a man, that a woman should be silent. Now the first thing I want us to know is how this passage is usually understood in our time. You might think most people would read it and simply assume that women in church cannot teach or have authority over a man. That used to be true. But not any longer.

Most people who read it today simply assume that Paul was misogynistic, that he did not fully respect women, that he was simply a child of his time, a typically chauvinistic Jewish rabbi, and that consequently his teaching is just wrong and can be disregarded. It’s part of the justification for disregarding Scripture and for that matter Christianity. That’s probably the majority position today. But it’s wrong.

So what I want us to see is what Paul saw and heard and knew. I want us to get back to what was really happening in the first-century with empathy and historical understanding. Paul, we know from other texts, had high respect for women – remarkably high for a man of his time and culture. But Paul is writing to a small persecuted Christian minority with no realistic, loving way to change the deep structures in its society. It was an age that insisted on hierarchy, on a rigid chain of command, under its Roman masculine elite, on clear patterns of dominance and subordination, learned from Plato and Aristotle. It was an age of sophisticated brutality and military occupation. It was an age so misogynistic, so down on women, that many men in the highest class of Roman-Greek society chose same-sex relationships – because why love a woman, why be intimate with a woman, when men were so much more noble, more admirable, more physically beautiful, in fact, superior in every way. It was an age when an aristocratic father – the paterfamilias – had life-and-death authority over everyone in the household, and nothing would be allowed to challenge his authority.

Paul will say in our text, “Pray that we may live peaceful and quiet lives.” He is writing in dangerous times, years when James the Lord’s brother is killed, Peter is killed, and he himself has just spent most of five years as a Roman prisoner. These are years in which frankly any caring Christian man would caution against women rising to prominence if

that were all. The Roman elite already suspected eastern religions of subverting Roman values. The satirist Juvenal in the early second century would complain that the Syrian Orontes had poured into the Tiber. He was saying that the river of Antioch was pouring sewage into the river of Rome, undermining Rome's authority patterns and Rome's ways of doing things.

Paul then in texts like 1 Timothy 2 is calling his readers to live as disciples of Christ within the leadership structures and authority patterns of his day, so, for instance, "Slaves, obey your masters." The big picture is that he is guiding Christians in the setting in which they live; he is not making that setting valid and mandatory for all time. Paul is doing in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 what he did in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 when he asked Christian women in Corinth to remain silent and in submission in the church. He is asking them in spite of their freedom in Christ to accommodate to contemporary standards of decency. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul is writing what the moralist Plutarch also wrote, that respectable women should not be heard in public, and what the historian Livy quotes Cato as saying – that Roman matrons accosting other women's husbands (about political issues) should have asked their own husbands at home. Paul wrote then exactly what he had to – to keep the church respectable in Corinth. As near as we can tell, he is asking Christian women to quit disrupting worship by asking ill-informed questions out loud, the kinds of questions only the uneducated would ask. You can imagine how disruptive that would be even today. To do this then was considered highly offensive and disgraceful, and Paul consistently cared about what would bring shame or honor to the church.

Paul's instructions to Timothy at Ephesus in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 arise out of the same concerns and address the same Roman-Greek society, but they also take into account a specific heresy, a specific weird idea, or set of ideas, plaguing the Ephesian church. The Ephesian strangeness involved myths and endless genealogies (we learn in 1 Timothy 1:3-7). And women were heavily involved in it and deceived by it. We know that from the letters to Timothy, the references to "old wives' tales" in 1 Timothy 4:7 (these were, as far as I know, the original "old wives"), to women leaving their homes and meeting together, idlers, gossips, busybodies, in 1 Timothy 5:13-15, and to weak-willed women susceptible to wild speculation in 2 Timothy 3:6-7. This heresy or weirdness appears to be an early form of Jewish Gnosticism. Gnostics were those elitists who claimed to have special knowledge; *gnosis* was the Greek word for knowledge. The religious climate in Ephesus focused on Artemis as the Mother Goddess and glorified female primacy. This was the region that gave birth to the legends of male-hating Amazons. Expressed in Jewish terms, one would say that Eve (the feminine principle) came first; she created Adam, and it was Eve who had the *gnosis*. In response, Paul insists that women are not to teach or have authority over (in Greek, *authentain*) a man. This is the only time the verb *authentain* is used in the New Testament. There is another word for authority, and it shows up often. But this is it for *authentain*. And this alerts the interpreter to think hard here. *Authentein* means either (1) to domineer or seize authority in an overbearing way, or (2) to claim authorship of, or to claim to be the origin or source of. You can still see in English how *authentain* leads to either authority or authorship. And now in this context, Paul is saying that the feminine did not create the masculine. He draws on the Biblical

story of origins, and notes that Adam was created first, and far from the woman possessing special *gnosis*, it was she who was deceived. The creation story, he says, offers no room for female primacy. Women, as novices, are to learn in a spirit of quiet submission.

It is with this in mind that we come back to verse 15 – that women will be saved or kept safe through childbearing. And now it starts to make some sense – and it’s the only way that makes sense, I think – if it’s a response to some Gnostic horror of the body, the physical, the sexual, the ordinary bodily functions. In context, women’s roles being the hot issue in Ephesus, and Gnosticism swirling in the air, “saved through childbearing” is not mapped out as the way to heaven or as a command to have children. Instead it’s a response to some Gnostic rejection of the physical and natural bodily functions. A woman will be kept safe through childbirth, not necessarily physically (as we well know) but spiritually (this is spiritually safe to do) in counterpoint to those who forbid marriage and sexuality (which also comes up in 1 Timothy, in 4:3). Childbearing – like everything God created – is good (1 Timothy 4:4) “if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.”

With this we are back to seeing that salvation is such a larger concept than is traditionally thought. Its horizon is the world (John 3:17). It’s hands-on. It’s this-world. It’s about real-life. It’s about rescue and deliverance from all that enslaves and would destroy us. And it happens not just in a world to come, but here and now if we believe. It happens in childbearing. But salvation also has ethical implications, and so I ask us to return to the whole issue of men and women again. I remind you that for all the progress we’ve made, the gender equality we’ve publicly achieved, that my focus has always been on changing hearts; that is, my focus is always on teaching men to respect women fully and equally as individuals in the same way they respect other men. Most men I know do. But still sometimes I see men, Christian men, berating women, treating them without respect, as objects, as things, as subordinate, as inferior, in tones of taken-for-granted authority and condescension and ownership. This does not go well. This never goes well.

I am asking us to keep learning, to keep learning how to stop, how to stop the ways of hierarchy and domination and power and control, especially on the basis of birth, of how people were born. This is deep stuff. These assumptions of superiority run deep. To give them up, to become a servant again, requires something like almost rebirth, being born again. But that is our message. That is what Jesus offers us – power to start over, to become new.

– Dale Pauls