

INTERPRETING 1 TIMOTHY 2:8-15

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No one takes all of Paul's writings completely literally. Egalitarian and nonegalitarian scholars alike agree that some of Paul's writing is conditioned by the time and place in which he lived. So how do we distinguish between passages that are situation-specific, and those that should be universally applied? Regarding 1 Timothy 2:8-15, egalitarians share the same basic approach to interpretation: We recognize that knowing the first-century background can make a significant difference in understanding the biblical text.

THE INTERPRETATION QUESTION

Nearly all nonegalitarian scholars will grant the relevance of context to some extent; everyone recognizes the usefulness of cultural background in biblical interpretation. However, the nonegalitarian approach to cultural context is simply not consistent. For example, I began Paul, Women & Wives with a chapter explaining the cultural background of head coverings and Paul's arguments in 1 Corinthians 11:2-17. Paul uses one of the same arguments in this passage (the prior creation of Adam) that he uses in 1 Timothy 2. A nonegalitarian writer approvingly cited my treatment of 1 Corinthians 11:2-17 (for which I am grateful), acknowledging that head coverings are not a transcultural requirement. But he then curiously proceeded to categorically deny that one could take a similar approach to 1 Timothy 2!

The typical nonegalitarian method of interpreting 1 Timothy 2 is not feasible. Earlier Pauline letters specifically support women's ministry as prophets, ministers of the Word, and at least once an apostle (Rom 16:7). But if one takes 1 Timothy 2:11-12 literally (most nonegalitarians today take it with only selective literalism), it altogether prohibits women teaching men the Bible! Thus (as in head coverings), most nonegalitarians today do recognize some difference between the first-century meaning and the modern application; they simply will not take the implications of this difference as far as egalitarians do.

To harmonize 1 Timothy 2 with Paul's earlier letters one must adopt one of four approaches:

(1) Read all other Pauline passages in light of a not-very-literal interpretation of this one (so most traditional interpreters);

(2) Read this passage as applying to a specific situation (so most evangelical egalitarian interpreters);

(3) Argue that Paul moved from an egalitarian to a nonegalitarian position; or

(4) Deny that Paul actually wrote 1 Timothy (the view of many scholars, though not of most evangelical scholars).

The usual egalitarian position assumes a culture-specific method of interpretation, although even egalitarian approaches to 1 Timothy 2 may vary. For instance, Catherine Clark Kroeger's specific background for the passage differs considerably from Gordon Fee's. Nevertheless, all egalitarians share the same basic conclusion: 1 Timothy 2 does not silence all women in church transculturally.

ARGUING FOR A CULTURE-SPECIFIC METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

Would Paul have addressed a specific situation in the broad, sweeping terms used in 1 Timothy 2? When one reads the rest of Paul's letters and especially the rest of the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy, Titus), one can only answer: definitely! This is not to pretend that Paul's letters are not full of principles directly applicable to today's situations. They are! Murmuring and complaining today are probably not much different than they were when Paul wrote Philippians.

At the same time, other texts require some sensitivity to the original situation (matters like head coverings or food offered to idols) in order to translate the underlying principles into our situation. In these cases Paul works with transcultural principles, but he articulates them in specific ways addressing specific situations: If we ignore those situations when we interpret him, we must require all women to wear head coverings in church or risk disobeying the apostle!

Some state that while certain texts are culture-specific, texts that give specific commands are universally applicable. I would respond: *all* Scripture is universally applicable (2 Tim 3:16). However, this does not mean that Scripture is not articulated in culture-specific and language-specific ways; rather, it means that we have to take the situation into account when we interpret Scripture, reading it like case studies applying to specific situations in order to find timeless principles which we can then apply in other situations.

Inspiration does not change a writing's *genre*, or type of literature. Psalms are still psalms, narrative is still narrative, and epistles are still epistles. Pastoral letters, like sermons addressed to local congregations, can contain universal and culture-specific exhortations side-by-side; this should be true whether they are inspired or not.

For example, I sometimes write letters of exhortation containing mainly universal principles relevant to the particular situation I am addressing. Yet in those same letters

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I may include some exhortations relevant only to the situation I am addressing. Unless I consciously write expecting other, future readers *outside* the situation, I may never stop to distinguish between my universal and situation-specific exhortations. Because I intend all my exhortations to be relevant to my *immediate* audience I do not write these two kinds of exhortations in different ways or express them in different literary forms.

A later reader might therefore be able to distinguish between my universal and specific exhortations only by reconstructing the situation and then comparing my other writings addressing specific situations. Thus murmuring is always wrong; eating idol-food is sometimes wrong; women's authority as ministers of the Word was sometimes limited but sometimes *commended* (cf. Rom 16; Phil 4).¹

Therefore, in order to discover how to interpret 1 Timothy 2, we look first at Paul's earlier letters and then, more relevantly, at other passages in the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy, Titus).

PAULS EARLIER LETTERS

Paul always writes in the language and figures of speech of his day; he also uses cultural images presupposed in his day.² Even more to the point, Paul's letters are full of statements that are locale-specific and cannot possibly have meaning apart from the local situation.³ Sometimes Paul even alludes to matters known only to local congregations (e.g., 2 Thes 2:5; 1 Cor 1:16; 3:4-6; perhaps 15:29). This is not to deny that we can learn by analogy from the principles with which Paul addresses such local situations, but to note that it is impossible genuinely to interpret Paul's letters without attending to the fact that they are in fact *letters* addressing local congregations.

Thus the problem with eating (cf. 1 Cor 9:4) is when it causes others to stumble (1 Cor 8:13; 10:30-31). More relevantly, although Paul had lived among the Corinthians eighteen months (Acts 18:11), it is when the Corinthians are abusing the gifts that he specifically limits utterances in prophecy and tongues to three occurrences each (1 Cor 14:27, 29). But he addresses house churches of roughly forty people each; would he give the same instructions to a group of five Christians gathered for all-night prayer or some other very different situations? The issue is not that ushers in all churches should count the number of utterances and "bounce" anyone exceeding them: The trans-situational *principles* in the text address orderly worship and especially the need to edify those who are present.

Paul provides many direct commands that we do not observe today, and some that we cannot observe today. How many Christians put money into savings the first day of every week for a collection for the saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-3)? Paul commands his readers to receive Epaphroditus (Phil 2:29), but since the latter is now dead, we cannot fulfill this command. Paul exhorts his readers to

pray for him and his companions (2 Thes 3:1-2), but we who reject prayer for the dead cannot fulfill this command today. Instead we learn more general principles about hospitably receiving and praying for God's servants.

Must a transcultural application be absurd before we will limit it? Or do these "absurd" examples point out to us the way we ought to read Paul's letters consistently? To claim that only the *obviously* culturally limited passages are in fact culturally limited is simply to beg the question of interpretative methods. If these examples remind us of the *genre* in which Paul writes, they also remind us that Paul could freely mix directly transcultural statements with those that addressed merely specific situations. It should not surprise us that Paul relates to his readers where they are at. He specifically states that this is his missionary strategy (1 Cor 9:19-23; 10:31-33), and most of us similarly address issues relevant to those to whom we minister, in ways as relevant as possible.⁴

SPECIFIC SITUATIONS IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

Paul specifically writes to Timothy (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2) and Titus (Tit 1:4) in these letters, just as he addresses most of his other letters to particular churches. Paul specifically left Timothy in Ephesus to warn against those teaching false doctrines (1 Tim 1:3), and exhorts Timothy to do so according to the prophecies given him (1:18; 4:14; cf. 2 Tim 1:6); he also addresses specific false teachers (1:20), who are now dead. Although Paul did not leave us in Ephesus nor did we receive Timothy's prophecies, there are plenty of transcultural principles here, such as fighting dangerous doctrines, or heeding words of wisdom or properly tested prophecy. But again, noting that specific exhortations *can* have more general relevance does not allow us to simply assume that we *know* that transcultural relevance before we have studied the situation carefully.

When seeking to understand the context of 2:11-12, we earlier read that Paul exhorts men to pray properly (2:8), shall we assume that women should not pray properly? Or shall we assume that, just as Paul had a specific situation to address with the women (2:9-15), he also had a specific problem in mind addressing the local men's behavior (2:8)?

Similarly, the office of an "overseer" (3:1), like most other local-church offices in the New Testament, arose in a specific cultural context; it was practical for the church to borrow from the synagogue's models of leadership that already worked in the Roman world.

Some would retain as transcultural the requirement that one rule one's family properly as a condition for ruling the church (3:4-5). But this borrows ancient Mediterranean requirements for respectable leadership, in a culture where paternal authority could be enforced by severe discipline (in theory, even execution)—a culture which differs markedly from our own. How many contemporary Christians would regard as transcultural the warning that widows younger

than sixty will spread bad talk (probably best translated “false teaching”; 5:11-13), or that fables circulate especially among older women (4:7)?

If we must follow *all* commands in 1 Timothy as transcultural, even the most conservative churches are falling woefully short. Many do not prohibit water or mandate the use of wine for those with stomach ailments (5:23). Similarly, if we are to obey 2 Timothy, we should visit Paul soon, making sure we pick up his cloak and books from Troas before coming to him (2 Tim 4:9-13)—a command which may be a trifle difficult to fulfill these days, especially if Timothy already collected Paul’s belongings in Troas. (That Paul also calls Titus to come to him in Titus 3:12 surely makes this a transcultural requirement: We all should try to visit Paul in Rome, right?) We should also beware of Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim 4:14-15), despite the fact that, the mortality rate for people over 150 years old being what it is, he is probably dead.⁵

Perhaps more significant are passages providing instructions not merely to Timothy but to the church as a whole. Here, for example, widows must not be put on the roll for church support unless they are at least sixty years old, have been married only once (5:9), have raised children and washed strangers’ feet (5:10). Apart from our general neglect of caring for widows to begin with (today’s social welfare system differs from that of the first century; may we take this into account?), so few widows today have washed strangers’ feet that our churches can claim to obey Paul’s teaching without handing over much money for their support! Younger widows must remarry, not taking the pledge of membership in the order of older widows supported by the church (5:11, 14). How younger widows can obey this precept if they do not find husbands is not quite clear.⁶

Some of Paul’s commands in the Pastoral Epistles relate to avoiding apostasy (1 Tim 5:15) and—a matter related to the views of the broader culture—public reproach (1 Tim 3:2, 6-7, 10; 6:1; Tit 1:6-7; 2:5, 8, 10). This includes his exhortations concerning the obedience of slaves (1 Tim 6:1-2; cf. Tit 2:9-10), which most evangelicals today would grant addressed a specific cultural situation. If the principles are more binding than the situation-specific exhortations that illustrate them, we may wish to consider how today’s situation differs from that of the first century, and how repressing women rather than liberating them challenges the Church’s witness.⁷

CONCLUSION

The egalitarian approach to 1 Timothy 2 is consistent with the nature of Paul’s letters. If we differ among ourselves on the exact reconstruction of the situation, we may at least agree that everyone—including nonegalitarians—interprets many of Paul’s statements, including some commands, as situationally conditioned. The question as to whether or

not 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is one such command cannot therefore be dismissed *a priori*; we *must* examine the possible background for the passage.⁸

¹ On passages commending women’s ministry, see e.g., Paul, Women & Wives (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 237-57.

² I have sought to provide much of the background on a popular level in The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 407-646.

³ E.g., Rom 1:7, 10, 13; 15:22-24; ch. 16; 1 Cor 1:2, 11-12; 4:17; 5:1-6; 6:6-8; 7:5; 8:9; 11:17-22; 16:5-12; 2 Cor 1:1, 15-17; 1:23-2:13; 6:11-13; 7:5-16; 9:2-5; 10:6-16; 11:1-21; 12:11-13:10; Gal 1:2; 4:12-20; Phil 1:1, 4-8, 19; 4:2-3, 10-19; Col 1:2; 2:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2:1, 17-18; 2 Thess 2:1.

⁴ Even some general principles in Paul’s letters, like many general exhortations in antiquity, could admit exceptions. Most Christians today would agree that submission to authorities (Rom 13:1-7) is a valid transcultural principle, but not when those authorities seek to force us to do evil or to abandon our practice of the faith. Paul does not state such an exception, but his emphasis and priorities throughout his letters make it clear that he would expect us to recognize such exceptions. For the same reason, even those who hold that husbands have a transcultural right to rule their families cannot ignore the general rules which summon all Christians to serve one another, submit to one another, and seek one another’s good—which exhortations at the very least qualify any Christian’s use of authority!

⁵ For other unquestionably situation-specific allusions, see e.g., 2 Tim 1:2-6; 3:14-15; 4:20; Tit 1:4-5.

⁶ Even in Paul’s day, this was probably one of his “general principles” that might admit exceptions; thus church leaders should be “husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6), possibly directed against teachers advocating mandatory celibacy (1 Tim 4:3; see my And Marries Another [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], 83-103), but Paul himself was unmarried. Paul warned Timothy not to rebuke others harshly (1 Tim 5:1-2), but under different circumstances rebuked Peter publicly (Gal 2:14), which was normally considered inappropriate behavior (including by Paul—1 Tim 5:19-20).

⁷ See Alan Padgett, “The Pauline Rationale for Submission: Biblical Feminism and the *hina* Clauses of Titus 2:1-10,” Evangelical Quarterly 59 (1987): 39-52.

⁸ One objection to this passage being situationally conditioned is Paul’s appeal to Genesis, which invites us to explore how Paul applies the Old Testament. We have addressed that issue in a previous article (“How Does Paul Interpret Eve in 1 Timothy 2?” Priscilla Papers 11:3, Summer 1997]: 11-13).