

Negotiating Boundaries: Reading Pauline Prescriptions in Their Cultural Context

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In his ministry, both to Christians and to those who were not Christians, Paul found himself negotiating his way through social conventions and cultural boundaries which, in many cases, were contrary to the gospel he proclaimed. Two such situations relate to the role of women and are found in Eph 5:21–33 and 1 Tim 2:11–12. These are often read today as prescriptions which determine, to a large extent, the function of women in homes and churches.

This article explores the way Paul sensitively responded to and negotiated the culture of his time. It will be argued that Paul's prescriptions, in these two passages at least, should be seen as context-dependent applications of Christian principles and, as a result, are not necessarily binding in twenty-first-century homes and churches. Rather, Paul's negotiating strategies invite us to consider how we too can carefully work our way through our cultural boundaries in the interests of the message of the gospel.

Paul in His Cultural Context

In Paul's world, Rome was in control. Within Israel, Jews shared responsibility for law and order with Roman appointees, and Jews were often involved, for example, in the collection of Roman taxes (Luke 5:27–28; 19:2). Outside of Israel, however, government was in the hands of non-Jewish authorities at all levels.¹

A range of gods were worshipped (Acts 17:16) including Diana/Artemis, who is particularly important for understanding several NT texts when manifested as Artemis of the Ephesians, the patron goddess of Ephesus (Acts 19:28).² Worship of the Roman emperor was well established, with the emperor considered a god and the saviour of his people. According to the inscription on the Priene Calendar,³ Caesar Augustus was considered a god and a saviour, and his exploits were recognised as “good news” (Greek *euangelion*, translated “gospel” in the NT) by those who worshipped him. In spite of this, in Israel the Jewish people were given a great deal of freedom to worship their God as they wished.

The common language was Greek, and Greek philosophers (Acts 17:18) were well known to those who were educated (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12). Slavery was widespread in Roman, Greek, and Jewish societies, with slaves having few protections, although eventual emancipation was often achieved.

Some of the major (and largely undisputed) features of the first-century cultural context which might influence the understanding of the biblical text as it informs women's ministry today were the hierarchical relationships among men, women, children, and slaves. The structure of these relationships, with men at the top and slaves at the bottom, was widely (although not universally)⁴ accepted in the societies of the Roman empire. This structure was taken for granted by first-century Roman citizens, including Paul. Men possessed

authority over women in Greek, Roman, and Jewish societies and occupied most positions of government, education, and industry. Higher education was available almost exclusively to men, and educated men made the decisions that affected all members of all communities. The place of women in marriage and divorce was much more precarious than that of men.⁵

The ministry of the early Christians, including Paul, was carried out in at least three distinct contexts: (a) among Jewish people in Israel in the temple or in synagogues and, beyond, among Hellenised Jews and Gentile “God-fearers” like Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48; see also Acts 2:5; 13:26, 50; 17:4, 17) who were sympathetic to Jewish beliefs and practices, (b) among Gentiles in public settings, and (c) within congregations of Hellenised Jews and Gentiles in Greco-Roman cities outside of Israel. Significantly, Paul's ministry was adapted to each of these settings and demonstrated his response to the social environment in which he shared the good news of Jesus.

Ministry among Those Familiar with Israel's Story

In the first setting, Christian leaders such as Peter, John, and Stephen reminded their Jewish listeners of what their Scriptures said and urged these people to accept the truth that Jesus, who had recently been killed by their leaders, was now alive and was therefore shown to be the foretold Messiah.⁶ This was likely the message Paul preached in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16–47) as well. While some (sometimes many) of the listeners believed what they heard, opposition from those committed to the teaching of the Jewish leaders often led to negative, sometimes violent, responses (e.g., Acts 5:33; 7:57–58; 9:29).

Public Ministry among Gentiles

Paul's speech in Athens is a good example of his ministry in the second of the above settings. Athens was a centre of Greek learning and a gathering place for Greek philosophers and others interested in debating the intellectual issues of the day. Paul's strategy was not simply to tell them they were wrong and provide them with the truth. Instead, he identified a means by which he was able to say what he wanted and to ensure that he gained a hearing. He became, briefly, one of them (1 Cor 9:22). Noticing that, along with the many altars in the city to named gods, one was to “The Unknown God,” Paul proceeded to explain who this “unknown god” was. He spoke in their language and quoted their own philosophers (Acts 17:28; see also 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12). In this way he gained a hearing. While some believed what he said, others thought his words were nonsense, and still others were not so sure and wished to hear more.

In Ephesus, Paul preached, taught, and spoke to individuals, convincing some of the truth of the good news of Jesus. Eventually,

however, as recorded in Acts 19, a riot ensued because the craftsmen who made silver shrines of Artemis, patron goddess of Ephesus, believed that their business would suffer if people turned from worshipping Artemis (Acts 19:23–41). The city clerk, as he attempted to quell the riot, advised the silversmiths to take their grievances to court rather than engage in violence. While he claimed that the truth of Artemis and her image which fell from heaven was undeniable, he asserted that Paul and his friends had done nothing wrong; they had “neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess” (Acts 19:37 NIV). He urged the silversmiths, if they believed they had reason to bring a charge against Paul and his friends, to do so and have the charge dealt with by a legal body. In this case, Paul had not directly confronted the religious leaders of the city but simply engaged in discussion with ordinary citizens about the life of Jesus. Of course, what he had said did have implications for their worship of Artemis. But Paul was not about large-scale social revolution; his ministry was to people who would listen, and he was concerned with ensuring, where possible, conditions where people would listen to him. Confrontation with the followers of other gods occurred, not because Paul made a deliberate effort to bring this about, but as a result of other circumstances.

During his ministry, as described in Acts, Paul placed a great deal of trust in the Roman legal authorities whom he believed would establish his innocence when charges were brought against him. He was therefore scrupulous to remain within the boundaries of the laws of his day and to throw himself on the mercies of the various tribunals (Jewish or Gentile) responsible for the upkeep of law and order. In Corinth, Gallio the Roman proconsul saw no problem with Paul’s ministry as far as Roman law was concerned and ejected the Jewish complainants from his court (Acts 18:12–17). Paul himself claimed to Porcius Festus in Caesarea Maritima, the centre of Roman government in Judea: “I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar” (Acts 25:8 NIV).

Ministry in House Churches

In the third setting, Christian congregations and households, Paul discussed in more detail issues and implications relating to the gospel, knowing that these contexts were more private.⁷ The focus of his letters and personal ministry was right thinking about the role of Jesus in history and the implications of Christian living, especially amid those who were not Christians. Paul’s audience for this ministry included many non-Jewish believers for whom many of the OT practices Paul claimed were not relevant. However, he saw it as important to acquaint them with the way Scripture had anticipated the coming of Jesus the King. Some Jewish believers sought to impose their practices on non-Jewish believers—which Paul strenuously opposed (e.g., Acts 15:1–2). Much of what Paul wrote was in response to particular problems which arose among Christians in Greek and Roman settings, and he frequently encouraged the people to live in such a way that their lives provided an example which would invite others to join them. Certainly, he advocated that they live in a way which would not discredit the faith among those who dwelt in cities in which Christians lived (Rom 12:17–18; 1 Cor 10:31–33; Col 4:6; 1 Thess 4:11–12; 5:15; see also Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 3:15).

The NT provides guidance for first-century husbands and wives in what have been called “household codes” (Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Pet 3:1–7). These are adapted from similar household codes found in the Greco-Roman world and deal with the same types of relationships—husband/wife, parent/child, and master/slave. Lynn Cohick describes the situation: “We find that the biblical household codes reflect the range of views held by ancient philosophers, but every popular position comes under the scrutiny of Christ’s incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and return.”⁸

So, while Paul’s writings do imply cultural change, he was careful not to say anything that explicitly called for wholesale cultural change. For example, many times he claimed that Jesus was Lord and that before him all knees would bow in submission and worship including, by implication, those of the emperor (Phil 2:9–11; Rom 14:9; Col 2:10, 15). On the other hand, he advocated that Christians should be obedient to the existing authorities (Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1) since all authority is under God’s authority.

An instructive example of Paul’s careful negotiation of culturally defined boundaries in each of these three settings is in his advice to masters and slaves. In his letters to the Ephesian and Colossian Christians (Eph 6:5–9; Col 3:22–4:1) his advice seems to be to slaves who may not have had Christian masters and to masters who may have had non-Christian slaves. While refraining from overt criticism of the institution of slavery, or of the cultural relationships between masters and their slaves, Paul advised Christian slaves to carry out their duties as though they were serving Jesus while Christian masters were encouraged to treat their slaves justly and fairly since they had a Master in heaven. This advice is appropriate in the second of the above settings. However, in the letter to Philemon, we have advice given to the Christian master of a slave who was now a Christian and, while Paul also refrains from criticism of the institution of slavery, he urges Philemon to consider Onesimus “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (Phlm 16 NIV). Within the third of the above settings such open advice was possible. David DeSilva expresses the situation in this way:

Even if the gospel inherently pushes in egalitarian directions, seen for example in the recognition that slave and master are actually “brothers” in the Lord (Philem 15–16) and are equal in God’s sight (Eph 6:9), the author of I Timothy (in concert with several other New Testament authors) does not consider these to reflect the essential agenda of the gospel. Rather than fight these battles, which would fuel society’s suspicion against the group as subversive of the social order, he postpones those battles in favor of the larger interest of nurturing an environment in which the gospel can spread and every person come to a knowledge of God in Jesus Christ (1 Tim 2:4).⁹

Beyond Paul’s letters, E. A. Judge sets out how the NT tracks three stages in the relationship between Christians and their Greco-Roman social environments.¹⁰ The first is exemplified by the situation in Acts and Romans where Paul sees the Roman authorities as ministers of God, upholding justice in the interest of law and order. The third is exemplified by Revelation, written at a time when the Roman authorities were actively persecuting Christians (and Jews), leading to a more open repudiation of Roman authority by Christians (although in coded form). Between these, the second stage is one where Christians submit to the authorities but without confidence

that justice for them will be upheld. Nowhere do Paul's letters or Acts claim explicitly that Caesar was not a god, but the gospel Paul preached clearly implied this (Rom 14:9; Phil 2:9–11; Col 2:10, 15). It is in the book of Revelation (for example, chs 17 and 18) that criticism of the Roman empire and its leader can most clearly be found.

Paul and Cultural Boundaries in 1 Timothy 2:11–12

One of the passages in the NT about which there is a great deal of contention, not least among evangelical Christians, is 1 Tim 2:11–12: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over [1984 NIV ‘have authority over’] a man; she must be quiet [1984 NIV ‘be silent’]” (2011 NIV).

For most living in our present age, v. 12a, “I do not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man,” seems like a command from Paul. These words leap out and demand attention because they appear to be a definite instruction and, perhaps, they seem to push against the feminist aspects of the culture of our time.¹¹ Regardless of the stance taken with respect to the role of women in the church, this passage acts for twenty-first-century readers as the basis upon which the rest of the passage is to be understood—Paul does not permit women to teach or have authority over men.

However, it is unlikely that Paul's first-century audience would have understood his statement in v. 12a in this way and as the main point of the passage. It was particularly uncommon to allow women to teach or have authority over men in first-century settings. This would be true regardless of whether Timothy understood Paul's use of the rare Greek word *authentēin* to mean something like “have authority over” (as in the 1984 NIV), “assume authority over” (as in the 2011 NIV), or “dictate to” (as in Tom Wright's *The New Testament for Everyone*¹²). However, their response to Paul's encouragement for women to learn (v. 11) would be quite different. This was an encouragement which went against the contemporary cultural norms, and first-century readers would probably sit up and take note. For them, v. 11 would be the focus of Paul's message to Timothy in this part of his letter. Paul's statement in these verses is to be understood as an encouragement to women to do something out of the ordinary rather than as a restriction echoing more typical expectations for women. As such, the notions of “quietness” and “submission” as understood by twenty-first-century readers and hearers require reconsideration. If women are being encouraged to learn, the prime submission would be to the words of Scripture or to God himself. Instead of requiring women to learn without disturbing others, it is more likely that Paul is requiring others to refrain from disturbing them as they learn—they are to learn without being disturbed by others!¹³ To reinforce this encouragement, Paul repeats it at the end of v. 12: “She must be undisturbed.”¹⁴

How then would his audience understand Paul's intention in v. 12a? From what has been said above, one of Paul's concerns was that behaviour should be such that Christians are able to gain a hearing from those in the surrounding non-Christian community. Even though there were many issues in the Gentile community that offended Paul, his own aim was not to advocate wholesale change but to gain a hearing for the gospel of Jesus. The consequences of this gospel for the lives of new Christians would eventually follow. Promotion of radical change would interfere with this process

and make the witness of Christians much more difficult because of resulting opposition. This means that v. 12a, instead of being a command, would most likely be read as reassurance by Paul that, while encouragement for women to learn might be a rather radical change, Paul was not about to go further and allow women to teach or to have (or assume) authority over men and thus make life more difficult for members of the church at Ephesus.¹⁵

If vv. 11 and 12b are indeed the focus of this passage for first-century Christians, the role of Paul's appeal to Gen 2 and 3 in 1 Tim 2:13–14 is to be seen as a reason for educating women rather than the reason women should not be allowed to teach or to have authority over men.

Paul and Cultural Boundaries in Ephesians 5:21–33

The Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures in which Paul was immersed and which he, therefore, would largely have taken for granted were relatively uniform with respect to the normal, hierarchical relationship between men and women. There was little basic difference between the status of women in these societies, with heavy (but not universal) restrictions on what women could do in educational, political, legal, or family spheres.¹⁶ Paul was concerned that the gospel be presented in such a way that it gained a hearing (1 Cor 10:32–33). Although what he said about Jesus struck at the foundations of Roman society, he did not openly attack firmly established institutions of that society. In Christian households and congregations, all members would be required to love (John 13:34; 15:12, 17; Rom 13:8; 1 Pet 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11–12; 2 John 5), serve (Gal 5:13), encourage (1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:24–25), teach (Rom 15:14; Col 3:16), admonish (Col 3:16), bear with (Rom 12:10b; 15:1; Col 3:13), and submit to (Eph 5:21) one another, but Paul here chooses from such a list “submit” for the wife and “love” for the husband. His advice in the household code in Eph 5:22–6:9 appears to focus on the ways each participant could most easily disrupt the relationship: slaves could be lazy; masters could be harsh; wives could be unsubmitive; husbands could be unloving. Thus, slaves are advised to serve their masters wholeheartedly as if they were serving the Lord; masters are advised to refrain from threatening their slaves; wives are advised to submit to their husbands; husbands are advised to love their wives. Of course, all these attitudes are those which elsewhere in the NT are required of all Christians, but it appears they are selected here as the most appropriate needs for counteracting potentially disruptive influences in relationships. It is also possible to see Eph 5:21 (“submitting to one another”) as an over-arching command which subsumes many, perhaps all, of the others.¹⁷

To illustrate the hierarchical relationship between husband and wife, he appeals to an analogy with another apparently hierarchical relationship—that between Christ and his church. Paul argues that wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord because “the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (5:23 NIV). In the next verse, Paul instructs the wife to submit to her husband “as the church submits to Christ” (NIV).

Thus, the choice of this hierarchical analogy is dependent on Paul's prior pragmatic acceptance of a view that the existing

relationship between husband and wife is hierarchical, which was the status quo in his time. However, there is nothing in Paul's argument here which compels us to draw the opposite conclusion (as many do), namely, that because the relationship between Christ and his church is hierarchical the relationship between husband and wife is also necessarily hierarchical. George W. Knight quotes W. J. Larkin with approval: "The instruction for conduct in marriage in Ephesians 5:22–33 becomes unquestionably binding when seen as a reflection of Christ's relation to the church."¹⁸ Contrary to the claim by Knight, who sees "husbands and wives as analogues of Christ and the church,"¹⁹ the opposite is in fact the case in Eph 5:22–25: the loving relationship between Christ and his church is used to illustrate the nature of the relationship between a husband and wife in a culture where this relationship is already hierarchical. One could imagine that, if Paul lived in a society based on more egalitarian relationships, he would not use this analogy but would draw on another more appropriate one (or, at least, focus on other aspects of the Christ-church analogy than that of hierarchy).

Alongside his preaching of the message of Jesus, Paul was concerned with propriety of behaviour within a first-century social structure and of necessity adopted that structure, knowing no other.

Conclusion

For many Christians, any appeal to cultural considerations in seeking to understand the Bible amounts to a distrust of Scripture or provides opportunities to smuggle in avenues by which the authority of the Bible can be undermined.²⁰ However, Paul was aware of many aspects of the culture in which he was embedded and especially of those aspects which were contrary to the gospel he preached. He was careful, as far as possible, to remain within first-century cultural boundaries while, at the same time, preaching a message that implied radical changes to many of those boundaries. Paul was more concerned with gaining a hearing for his message about Jesus than with attacking wholesale the society in which he lived.

Paul encouraged Timothy to ensure women learned without being disturbed, while himself ensuring that he was not about to make things more difficult for Timothy by letting women assume authority over men in a culture where this was not a generally accepted practice. Household codes led to order in Greco-Roman households, but Paul ensured, in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, that these codes for Christian families reflected Christian virtues of mutual submission and love. In both cases, the hierarchical relationship between men and women can be seen as an interim culturally dependant feature, into which Paul infuses enduring Christian virtues. As well as taking seriously the role of first-century cultural norms in helping us understand biblical texts, we can also learn from—and be inspired by—Paul as we negotiate the cultures of our time.

Notes

1. E. A. Judge, "St Paul as a Radical Critic of Society," in *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays* by E. A. Judge, ed. David Scholer (Hendrickson, 2008) 113.
2. On Artemis of Ephesus, see Sandra Glahn, "The Identity of Artemis in First-Century Ephesus," *BSac* 172/687 (July–

Sept 2015) 316–34; Glahn, "The First-Century Ephesian Artemis: Ramifications of Her Identity," *BSac* 172/688 (Oct–Dec 2015) 450–69; and Glahn, *Nobody's Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament* (IVP Academic, forthcoming).

3. The text of the inscription can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calendar_Inscription_of_Priene.
4. Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (IVP Academic, 2023) 32–34. Gupta shows, for example, that upper-class women could occupy a higher social status than a man of lower class.
5. Judge, "St Paul as a Radical Critic of Society," 109–15.
6. Acts 2:14–41; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 7:2–53.
7. Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 39. Gupta points out that, in many Greco-Roman private homes (especially those of wealthy people), there were public spaces where patrons could meet clients and visitors.
8. Lynn Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2020) 343. Extended discussions of first-century household codes can be found in Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 342–348 and Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 185–99.
9. David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (IVP Academic, 2004) 763.
10. E. A. Judge, "The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups," in Scholer, ed., *Social Distinctives*, 53–55.
11. For example, see Douglas Moo, "What Does it Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men: 1 Timothy 2:11–15?," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway, 1991) 180.
12. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Pastoral Letters* (SPCK, 2003) 22. Discussion of debates about the meaning of *authentēin* can be found in Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 170–73 and in Jamin Hübner, "Translating ἀθεντέω (*authentēō*) in 1 Timothy 2:12," *Priscilla Papers* 29/2 (Spring 2015) 16–26.
13. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 22, 25; N. T. Wright, "The Biblical Basis for Women's Service in the Church," *Priscilla Papers* 20/4 (Autumn 2006) 5–10.
14. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 22.
15. This possible problem would no doubt be compounded by the apparent prevalence of false teaching in the church at Ephesus. See Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 165–77.
16. See endnote 8.
17. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 348–50.
18. George W. Knight, "Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21–33 and Colossians 3:18–19," in *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 166 (223 in the 2021 ed.), quoting W. J. Larkin Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Baker, 1988) 109.
19. Knight, "Husbands and Wives," 161.
20. See, for example, Claire Smith, *God's Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women* (Matthias Media, 2012) 46.



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