

Paul, Timothy, the Gnostics and Women

Peter Baylis explores some of the influences of Gnosticism.

AS predicted by Paul, the 'falling away' or apostasy of sections of the early Christians from the true Gospel was swift. One of the greatest apostasies was the heresy known as Gnosticism. It was violently suppressed and driven underground by the power of the State Church, but it surfaced repeatedly amongst such groups as the Albigensian Cathars and still exists today.

What was Gnosticism about? Let's construct a 'statement of faith' for it:

- 1) That which is physical is evil; spirit is good.
- 2) Salvation is by your pure spirit escaping from your vile body and ascending to heaven. The means of such escape is 'special knowledge', *gnosis* in Greek, hence Gnosticism.
- 3) The Old Testament God had created the evil physical world. Hence he himself is evil and a deceiver.
- 4) The body is evil and to be treated harshly by fasting etc. But sexual immorality is fine because it breaks the law of the evil creator; marriage however is forbidden.
- 5) Creating more vile flesh by having children is evil. Women who give birth will be hindered from entering Gnostic heaven.
- 6) Eve is worshipped as a perfect, spirit being, Adam's creator and, united with the Serpent, the enlightener of mankind with the True Knowledge.
- 7) Knowledge of your origins via your family tree is important to salvation; Eve is the origin of all.
- 8) Christ being perfect did not have a physical body, he only appeared to have one.

1 John 4:2-3 is a prime example of a verse countering the Gnostic heresy and Christadelphians universally recognise it as such:

Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist.

This clearly refers to the Gnostic heresy of the Christ with no physical body. We suggest that the letters to Timothy are equally preoccupied with the Gnostic threat.

Consider 1 Timothy 1:4 which makes it plain that Timothy's congregation at Ephesus is beset by false teachers:

...Not to teach false doctrines...nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. (NIV throughout this article.)

Gnostic mythology turned the scripture on its head.¹ The false doctrines referred to in this verse are likely to be elements of Gnosticism such as: that Cain was a hero and Abel a knave; that Eve and the Serpent brought salvation; that you should oppose the evil Creator at every turn; that if he said 'thou shalt not', thou jolly well shalt! Gnosticism was a religion of revolt against every divine principle. This same verse also points to the Gnostic obsession with genealogies.

Not surprisingly Paul has a great many other concerns:

They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods....(1 Timothy 4:3)

Here is Gnostic revulsion at maintaining vile flesh in both its main forms! Further:

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales. (1 Timothy 4:7)

These 'old wives' tales' were the secret lore of Gnosticism, often taught to impressionable children and young wives by the older women.

...rather train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value ... for both the present life and the life to come. (1 Timothy 4:8)

Gnosticism taught the opposite; your spirit is already perfect, it only requires you to suppress your flesh by harsh ascetic practices.

The apostle's criticism of Gnosticism is seen particularly in **1 Timothy 2** which begins with a request for prayers to be made for everyone. Might this suggest that some groups in the congregation were not being prayed for? Then Paul underlines Christ's mediatorship 'for all', not just for some factions of the congregation.

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2: 5-7)

What other mediators were competing with Christ in Timothy's Ephesus? Obviously the fertility Goddess Artemis held strong sway in the public imagination of Ephesus (Acts 19). Women mediated her to her followers. Gnosticism conflated spirit-guide Eve with many pagan mother-deities, including Artemis, and the hidden 'gnosis' was only to be learnt from feminine spirit-beings and women gurus. Paul is arguing against the idea that only women had the saving teaching; it was the man Christ Jesus who was the mediator! Note the emphasis on his body in 3:16. And there was not a false creator god and a true Gnostic god; there is but one God.

Paul continued:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first.... And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the

woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing.... (1 Tim 2:11-15)

Already, in the light of our comments on Gnostic teaching, this passage should be reading rather differently from the orthodox slant! Usually these verses are quoted to 'prove' that women must never speak in the ecclesia. Good Christadelphian practice however is being ignored:

Any doctrine must be suspect when it rests on only one verse. Much more so when the interpretation ... violates ... scripture.¹

Bro. Ron's principle is a Christadelphian tradition of pure, solid gold. There are four verses in the entire Bible which are taken to teach that women cannot speak and teach but there are the equivalent of a couple of chapters' worth saying that women should pray, speak, teach and lead. Common sense and Christadelphian tradition say 'Go with the majority of passages and doubt the face-value meaning of the minority.' Why is this sound principle driven away with blows over this raw issue, but sanely upheld in almost all others?

So what is this quietness (AV silence) Paul speaks of?

Silence (AV/RSV) in v.12 does NOT mean 'silence'; it is the Greek word *hesychia*, which carried the idea of 'quietness' – 'being less loud' – as in NIV. The adjective form is translated as quiet in verse 2 ('that we may live peaceful and *quiet* lives'). If Paul meant for a woman not to speak he would have used *sigan* which does mean, 'to refrain from speaking'. This fits our context; a woman should cooperate with sound instruction, and not be boisterous and rebellious like a Gnostic virago!

This contrasts with the foolish women referred to in 2 Timothy 3: 6-7 who are 'always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.' Note also the change from 'women' in 2:9-10 to 'woman' in verse 11; it appears husband and wife is being referred to.

The Greek words *gyne* and *aner* used here can be translated respectively wife/woman or husband/man depending purely on context. The use of the word 'submission' is probably contextual with Paul's use of the same word in his previous letter to the same congregation – the Epistle to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 5:22 Paul says, 'wives submit to your husbands.' Here in 1 Tim 2, the reference to Adam and Eve in v. 14 – the first husband and wife – and the reference to childbearing in v. 15 also point to a context of marriage.

So this quietness (silence) and submission is restricted to the relationship between husband and wife that the scripture DOES teach, the 'great mystery' of Ephesians 5:32. If it applies to every brother with every sister, what is special about marriage – just bed and board?

In verse 12 Paul says that a woman (wife?) is not to have 'authority' or *authentain* over a man (her husband?). When we want to understand the meaning of a scriptural word, we generally look at how the scriptures elsewhere use it; we can't do this with *authentain* because this is its one and only appearance! Koine Greek writings in general use it in several ways:

‘Precedence (coming first)’ which ties in with the Gnostic doctrine of Eve creating Adam

‘domineering, usurping authority’ like that of the Gnostic teachers.

‘To murder a wife and take her place.’ Again, extreme usurpation and violence!

Most of these meanings are about the abuse of power; I am certainly against that. The following translation is a perfectly permissible translation of the Greek text, and best suits the Gnostic context:

I do not permit (such) a woman to teach nor to represent herself as the originator of man; she is to be in conformity (to the scripture teaching) for Adam was created first, not Eve....

A woman who does not peddle Gnostic rubbish but who holds sound doctrine should teach and can hold proper authority, in line with Paul’s teaching elsewhere! Eve was deceived and a sinner, not enlightened and perfect as the Gnostics taught! This is far removed from saying that because Eve sinned all women are unfit to speak or lead.

The clinching verse is 15, because out of the Gnostic context it makes no obvious sense at all; is it saying good women don’t die while giving birth (they do) or that they are saved by having children? Paul was denying the Gnostic doctrine that having children would hinder a woman’s salvation. Paul teaches that salvation depends on faith in Christ, not on whether or not you have babies!

In short, 1 Timothy 2 is saying not that women should not teach, but that they should teach what is right, and not that they should not exercise authority, but that they should exercise it properly. So should men! This is in perfect conformity with the rest of the New Testament: mutual submission on the part of all.

The final proof that Gnosticism is behind many of the statements of Paul in this letter comes in 1 Timothy 6:20:

Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, (A.V. ‘science’) which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith.

The word ‘knowledge’ there is, you’ve guessed it, GNOSIS. (Strong’s 1108) Could Paul be more plain?

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References:

¹ *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels (The basic study on Gnostic doctrine.)

² *Wrested Scriptures*, Ron Abel (no date given) p.38

Other books consulted were:

I Suffer not a Woman, Richard and Catherine Clark-Kroeger, 1992

(This is devoted to explaining the Gnostic heresy with special reference to 1Tim 2. Believe me, I've only scratched the surface. Highly recommended.)

All one in Christ Jesus, Ian and Averil McHaffie, 1999 (Chapter 11)