

A Tale of Two Cultures

Understanding the historical and cultural context of the NT epistles.

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IN THE EVANGELICAL WORLD, WE STRESS THE IMPORTANCE of context for understanding Scripture rightly. We warn against “taking a verse out of context,” because the meaning of a verse is shaped or influenced by the paragraph or chapter in which it appears. Context may not be everything in interpretation, but the literary context is undeniably important for interpreting a passage faithfully.

As a historian, though, I have often found that we seem much less attuned to historical context. To be sure, we recognize the need to find out something about the Assyrians or Babylonians to understand what the prophets proclaimed, but we often fail to ask about the historical context into which New Testament authors wrote. Much of the time, we approach passages in the New Testament almost as if they were written with the twenty-first century in mind. Of course they weren’t. The New Testament letters, for example, were written to first-century churches in the ancient Roman Empire. To understand them, we need to take into account the culture into which the biblical authors wrote; that is, we need to consider the historical context.

One of the things that strikes me about the debate over the roles of women in the church over the last generation is how little attention has been shown to the question of the historical context for the statements made by the New Testament authors. There have been studies into some practices of other religions, arguments about the significance of certain artistic presentations in the catacombs, and so on; but I have not found sustained and informed attention given to the historical context—or, more accurately, historical contexts—of the various declarations about women and the church found in the various New Testament books.¹ Responsibility for regularly teaching a course on “Classical History” (ancient Greece, the Hellenistic period, and ancient Rome) has helped me become familiar with the historical contexts of the first-century churches. “In context,” the New Testament’s teaching on the role of women in the church is “a tale of two cultures.”

Two ancient cultures

Historians have long recognized that the ancient Roman Empire was composed of two quite different cultures. One was the Hellenistic culture spread around the eastern Mediterranean basin through the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. He saw himself as benefiting the various peoples of his day with the bless-

ings of ancient Greek (Hellenic) culture and practice; the Hellenistic world arose from the adoption and amalgamation of the Greek culture with the prior cultures found in the lands Alexander and his armies conquered. (As it turned out, though, the Hellenistic emphasis predominated in the cities, which Alexander tried to shape according to Greek patterns in order to encourage Greeks to live there and the natives to accept Hellenization.)

The other culture was Roman, the culture of the Roman Empire. While it predominated in the West, it never displaced the preceding Hellenistic one in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. To be sure, Roman law shaped the government and the dispensing of justice throughout the whole empire, but Roman culture could not supplant the sophisticated Hellenistic culture that had

taken root for more than three centuries by the time Rome’s *imperium* came along.

Thus, the ancient Roman Empire into which the church spread from Jerusalem in the first century knew two significantly different cultures. This pattern persisted in subsequent centuries, and it eventually resulted in Roman emperors drawing a dividing line in the empire, demarcating the western and eastern cultural spheres—an act that led (with many other factors) to the eventual division of the empire into two halves, governed by different rulers. The cultural practices in the two halves diverged in some significant regards, but the two cultures coexisted within the structures of the Roman Empire, each staying basically within its original area of influence. During the first century, the only exceptions were the outposts of the Roman government in the eastern half of the empire. Although those Roman colonies were in the eastern, Hellenistic cultural section, Roman practices prevailed in them because of the dominant Roman presence in those cities.

Second, among the Hellenistic/Roman divergences, the place of women in the two cultures was significantly different. In Roman culture, women had almost the same rights as men. (Indeed, women would not know such wide-ranging privileges and liberties again until the late nineteenth century.) Already by the first century B.C., women in the Roman cultural sphere retained their own identity before the law (rather than being the property of their husbands). As well, women could own, dispose of, and inherit property; further, they could manage their own finances and run businesses; moreover, they could launch divorce proceedings against their husbands. With all of this, they could be seen and could speak in public without damaging their reputation.²

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The contrast in the situation of women in the Hellenistic cultural sphere was dramatic. Already before Alexander, “oriental seclusion” prevailed. Throughout the ancient Near East, women knew few legal rights or social opportunities: they were defined legally as belonging to a man, and they were unquestionably men’s inferiors in social and legal standing.

The Greek practices Alexander exported were similarly limited; indeed, we have more information about those restrictions. In ancient Greece women had almost no personal legal rights; they could not own property or inherit it; they could not engage in any business ventures or trade in the marketplace. Furthermore, women could not appear in public without a man (either a guardian or a woman’s husband); almost the only ones who did were prostitutes. Women’s quarters in Greek homes were segregated from the entrances and exits so as to prevent contact with the outside world.³ If guests came to a family home, the men met together; even the host’s wife would not come among them. It was considered unseemly for a woman to speak with or interact with a man or men other than her husband.⁴ This Greek pattern only served to confirm the prior predilections of the ancient world into which Alexander spread Greek culture: women “knew their place,” and a proper woman remained within it.

The Greek exception

Ancient Greece, however, knew an exception to this restricted role for women. There was a class of women who could and did interact with men in public—the *hetairai* (singular, *hetaira*). The term *hetaira* had been used more generally since at least the time of Homer to refer to an association or to companions.⁵ In fully developed Hellenic culture, though, the companionship denoted by *hetaira* had become more specific. The *hetairai* were women from Ionia in Asia Minor—an area to which many Greeks had fled in the eighth century B.C., to avoid a devastating invasion that brought the most ancient Greek civilization (the Mycenaean) to an end. In Ionia, by contrast to mainland Greece, women could and did receive education; Ionia was also the first place where philosophy developed.⁶ These *hetairai* had the intellectual wherewithal to engage capably in discussions with Greek men on the mainland.

In ancient Greek society, *hetairai* had a status and role distinct among women. The orator Demosthenes spoke of the three classes of women known to his culture when he said that Greek men keep wives for legitimate children, female slaves for the chores of the household, and *hetairai* “for the sake of pleasure.” The pleasure expected of a *hetaira* was not only the stimulation of intellectual camaraderie, though; a *hetaira* also offered sexual favors. Thus, a *hetaira* was an intellectual “call girl”; she differed from a prostitute in ancient Greece in status and in what was expected of her: a *hetaira* offered intellectual intercourse

before the other kind. In ancient Greece, the way you knew if a woman was a *hetaira* was if she spoke openly with men in public.⁷

The role played by the *hetaira* in ancient Greece even influenced the Greek language—the cognate terms of *hetaira* became associated with sexual immorality. Already in Aeschylus, *hetairesis* denoted “unchastity” and *hetaireuo* “to keep company with a harlot.” Plutarch used *hetaireuomai* to mean “associating with *hetairai*,” but the full implications of that association were clear in his connoting by the same term “to prostitute oneself.” Plutarch and Zeno utilized the adjectival and adverbial cognates, respectively, to refer to what was “of or befitting a courtesan.” The fourth-century B.C. historian Clearchus used *hetairisma* for “harlotry.”⁸ In ancient Greece, the role, status, and practice of a *hetaira* were understood: she offered stimulation and gratification, both intellectual and sexual.

This pattern was exported by Alexander in his conquests, and the Hellenistic culture assimilated this attitude. However, it was unknown among the Romans: in their culture, women could speak and interact with men without soiling their reputation thereby or raising questions about their morality. In the Hellenistic world, though, the pattern became socially fixed and recognized. It lasted for centuries, well into the Christian era.

This can be seen in the second-century Christian leader Clement of Alexandria, for whom the verb form *hetaireo* meant “to make to fornicate” or “to prostitute”; with the fifth-century Church Father John Chrysostom, the term meant “to commit fornication.” Clement of Alexandria used another verb form, *hetairidzo*, for “to treat [something] as fornication”; with Epiphanius, *hetairismos* was used for “harlotry.”⁹ Clement of Alexandria reflected the long-standing influence of the *hetairai* within Hellenistic culture when he warned, “The worst accusation that can be brought against any woman not subject to a husband is that she was present at a party for men.”¹⁰

Unquestionably, the sense of what a *hetaira* was and did had permeated and left a lasting impression on Hellenistic culture. It is worth noting, as we turn to the specific apostolic injunctions regarding women’s roles in church, that the way a *hetaira* could originally be recognized was by whether a woman appeared and spoke openly among men in public. In ancient Greece, and in the Hellenistic culture that arose from it throughout the ancient Near East, to do so declared her status as a *hetaira*—and, with that, her availability for sexual favors.

Thus, in ancient Hellenic and Hellenistic culture, women might appear in public in the company of their husbands, but women could not engage in open discussions with men in public or else they would soil their reputations. The only women who openly interacted with men in public were either prostitutes or, at a higher social

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level, *hetairai*—who, unlike prostitutes, engaged in intellectual interchange with men before, and as well as, offering them sexual gratification. Of course, wives could and did engage in discussions with their husbands at home—but, evidently, not in public (or, at least, not in interaction with other men, as well).

Women and the New Testament church

With all this in mind, some interesting points become clear as one considers the New Testament data about women and the church.

In the first place, all the apostolic injunctions that women must keep quiet or not speak within the church—1 Timothy 2:11–12; 1 Corinthians 11:5; and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35—were written to churches situated in the Hellenistic culture. Keeping the *hetaira* background in mind, it becomes clear that for a Christian woman to speak publicly in church would send out cultural messages utterly out of keeping with Christian teaching and practice. For Christian women to speak out in the church—whether by asking questions or making statements themselves—would constitute a grave faux pas in the Hellenistic culture. Doing so would more than slightly suggest that these women were *hetairai* and, thus, sexually available: it would make the church come off as a brothel.

Indeed, Paul stringently instructed Christian women to “be silent in the churches” (1 Cor. 14:34), advising that “if there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home” (1 Cor. 14:35a). He immediately went on to declare the reason for this rigid direction: “For it is *shameful* [Greek: *aischron*] for a woman to speak in church” (1 Cor. 14:35b). The term *aischron* is “loaded”: while it could refer to physical ugliness, it was most commonly used in a moral sense (as here, by Paul) for something considered “shameful” or “base.” The nature of that baseness can be gauged by the term’s cognates, all of which referred to sexual obscenity.¹¹ The *hetaira* background informs the apostle’s declaration: in this Hellenistic cultural setting, for a woman to speak publicly was tantamount to declaring herself available for a variety of sexual activities.¹² The apostle’s declarations to Timothy, pastoring in the unquestionably Hellenistic cultural setting of Ephesus, that women should “learn in *silence*,” that they “are not to teach,” and that they must “*keep silent*” (1 Tim. 2:11–12) coincide precisely with this concern.

This all fits together well with the lone other specific instruction about women speaking in church—1 Corinthians 11:5 *allows* it if they are praying or prophesying. The prohibition against women speaking publicly in church was evidently not absolute and unequivocal. As long as they were speaking to God or from God, they could speak in church without causing scandal. To do so required, though, that any such woman wore a head covering; were she not to do so would be equivalent to “having her head shaved,” which would also be “*disgraceful*” (Greek: *ais-*

chron [1 Cor. 11:6]). But why would it thus be “disgraceful”? Because a shaved head marked a woman convicted of prostitution. Again, the prohibitions regarding women speaking in church were all bound up with cultural attitudes toward female sexual immorality.

By contrast to this Hellenistic cultural picture, when one looks at the apostolic treatment accorded to women in the churches situated in the Roman culture, one finds a stark difference. In Rome, Paul acknowledged several women as gifted Christian leaders: Phoebe (16:1), Prisca (16:3), Mary (16:6), and Junia (16:7) all came in for praise—in ways that undermine the notion that Christian women must not teach, must be silent, and must not speak in the presence of men in a congregation. Specifically, Phoebe was styled a “servant” (Greek: *diakonos*), a role that must have caused her at least periodically to speak when males might have been present. Further, Prisca was commended as one “who works with me,” something she could hardly do without speaking to this man who was certainly not her husband. As well, this Prisca was commended elsewhere as the Priscilla who instructed Apollos (a male) better in the faith (cf. Acts 18:26). Paul evidently was not affronted by this, for he commended her for her work. Mary received apostolic accolades because she had “worked very hard among you [the Roman church]”; again, this would have been virtually impossible unless she could speak with men as well as women in the Roman church. Finally, in what must otherwise be one of the apostle’s most unguarded comments, Paul commended Junia as “prominent *among the apostles*.”

Further evidence to this effect comes from Paul’s letter to the Philippian church. Although situated in the eastern and otherwise Hellenistic cultural half of the empire, Philippi was a Roman colony (cf. Acts 16:12); because of this, Roman cultural practices prevailed in Philippi. This was made clear immediately in the beginning of Paul’s ministry there: the person who responded most hospitably to the proclamation was a woman named Lydia who, significantly enough, was described as “a dealer in purple cloth” (Acts 16:14). Purple was an imperial monopoly in the Roman Empire; to be a dealer in it meant that Lydia was not only a businesswoman, but one with unusually high status, for she dealt with the imperial household and the upper echelons of the empire’s government. Roman cultural mores prevailed in Philippi, rather than Hellenistic ones.

With that, it is striking how Paul speaks of two women in his letter to Philippi. In addressing Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2–3), he describes them both as women “who struggled beside me in the work of the gospel.” The “beside me” reflects the more liberated possibilities for women in the Roman cultural sphere; evidently, Paul was not hesitant to make use of female collaboration in that setting, and it must not have been “shameful” or “dis-

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graceful." This all is corroborated by the fact that the apostle immediately went on to associate them not only with himself but also with other Christian men in their work for the Gospel: "together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers." In this Roman cultural setting, women engaged fully in the culture and in the life of the church; they must have spoken openly with men not their husbands, for they were collaborators with Paul and those Christian men in the work of the gospel.

One church, two cultures

In summary, there is no scholarly question whatsoever that the first-century churches in the ancient Roman Empire existed in two significantly different cultures as regards the appropriate and acceptable place of women. Significantly, the much-discussed apostolic prohibitions against women taking a place fully equal to that of men in the church are all found in letters written to churches in the Hellenistic cultural sphere. In that sphere, as we have seen, cultural mores exegeted a woman who spoke publicly in the presence of men as a *hetaira*, a woman sexually available. It is scarcely surprising that the apostle Paul avoided even the hint that the church offered such opportunities and, consequently, strictly circumscribed the roles Christian women could take in church *in that cultural setting*.

Equally as significant is the fact that in churches in a more egalitarian culture the apostle had no such misgivings. In the churches where Roman cultural expectations prevailed, the data indicate that Paul had no qualms whatever about the full and free participation of women in the life and ministry of the church. In fact, he not only accepted it, he gloried in it and praised women for their full involvement with him and with other Christian men as coworkers in the gospel.

Where does this leave us, then, in our questions about the role of women in the church today? It is instructive to recognize that the apostle who stringently limited the roles of women in the church did so *only* in churches in the Hellenistic culture. His letters to churches in Roman cultural settings gave evidence that he did not follow such restrictive practices among them, and that he did not demand them in such a setting.

The apostolic concern with cultural expectations should make us alert to the ways in which a culture interprets the role of women in a society. Where such cultural mores prohibit full female involvement, then the proclamation of the gospel and the protection of the church's purity in that culture take precedence and call for a limitation of that involvement. However, that certainly does not preclude further instruction in the church along with a development of culture in subsequent history that might lead to greater equality, both in culture and in the practices of the church in that culture. Indeed, where such open cultural mores prevail—as in the ancient Roman cultural setting found in the first century—then the role

of women in the church need face no such prohibitions, and they can fully engage as coworkers in the gospel in the fullest sense.

In North America, we live in a culture where women can be, and speak, in public without staining their reputation. Christian women can do so in church without culturally impugning the reputation of the church. The apostle's instruction, example, and enthusiasm about the full involvement of women in the life of the church where that is culturally acceptable make clear what the stance of the church in North America today should be regarding the involvement of women in the church. To use the apostle's words, the church must embrace them as "coworkers in the gospel," in the fullest and freest sense possible. n



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Notes

1. This is true of most writings within both the hierarchical/ complementarian and the egalitarian camps. The most striking example I have seen of this lack of attention to historical context in treating the question of women's roles in the church was James W. Scott's article, "May Women Speak in Church?", published in the January 1996 issue of *New Horizons* (the denominational magazine of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). This article, written by a seminary-trained Ph.D., devoted careful attention to textual issues in the manuscripts and discussed Greek terms learnedly; it endorsed the hierarchical position on the question (in keeping with the OPC's stance on women in office). What was startling to me was that, for all the other scholarship manifest in the treatment, nothing in the entire article indicated any awareness of the potential importance of the cultural situation for understanding the New Testament passage examined.
2. John Matthews, "Roman Life and Society," in *The Oxford History of the Roman World*, ed. John Boardman, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 407.
3. Norman F. Jones, *Ancient Greece: State and Society* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), pp. 137–39; cf. also the treatment in Oswyn Murray, "Life and Society in Classical Greece," in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 249–256.
4. H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 219 (where Kitto cites statements by Plato and Xenophon to this effect).
5. J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962).
6. The first Greek philosophers all lived in Ionia—Thales of Miletus, Anaximander, and Anaximenes.
7. Kitto, pp. 220–21.
8. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).
9. G. H. Lampe, *Greek Patristic Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

10. Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, 2:54.

11. Liddell & Scott present the following regarding the cognates of *aisxron*: *aisxrosemmia* meant "obscenity"; *aisxrotos* meant "filthy conduct" (more specifically, "fellatio," in Aristophanes); and *aisxroourgeo* denoted "to act obscenely" (with masturbation the connotation).

12. The significance of the *hetaira* background for Paul's directives has not received attention in the literature on the "women and church" controversy to this point, as far as I have been able to ascertain. That background is not even mentioned, and consequently plays no role in the discussions in either the egalitarian treatment by Stanley J. Grenz (with Denise Muir

Kjesbo), *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), or the hierarchical/complementarian volume edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991). Indeed, the only reference I have found that acknowledged the *hetaira* background was the brief treatment by Georgia A. Harkness in her *Women in Church and Society* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), at p. 53; there, the author comments regarding the *hetairai*, in classic understatement, "Paul was not eager to have the women of the early Christian churches confused with them."