TWO TEXTS ON WOMEN (1 TIM 2:11-15; GAL 3:26-29)
A TEST OF INTERPRETATION

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The relation between men and women and the role of women in church and society is not a new question but it is one that has recently called for renewed attention. It is a kind of test question for New Testament interpretation. Further, because it is concretely a question about the way men and women exist in relation to each other, it has an immediate significance; it may also make it harder to discover and establish original meaning. Indeed, the concern may become an imposition that skews the reading of scripture. It is therefore not surprising that interpreters have arrived by different routes at opposing conclusions.

For example, some interpreters make 1 Tim 2:11-15 the key for understanding the role of women and other texts are interpreted by it. Others use Galatians 3:26-29 as the key and interpret other texts in relation to it.¹ What are we to make of this selection of texts, whether hierarchical or egalitarian, on the role of women? On one end of the spectrum Paul may be depicted as a chauvinist, on the other as a feminist.² Is it possible at all to understand Paul within the scope of these alternatives? Almost certainly the hearing of these texts on their own terms will require more nuance if not the abandonment of these alternatives.

The growing awareness of the relationships of men and women in the early church is an important contribution to this question.³ In part this flows from a more detailed understanding of the early church within its social and political world. This opens the way for the examination of the relevant data from a more comprehensive standpoint. In turn, this more detailed knowledge enables a clearer understanding of Paul’s intention in addressing particular situations within the early church through the study of existing sources. Within the larger whole the perplexing parts can become intelligible. It also confirms the sense we have that we cannot simply choose between
a passage like Gal 3:26-29 and 1 Tim 2:11-15 but must account for both in arriving at an adequate understanding. I will seek (1) to examine 1 Tim 2:11-15 and Gal 3:26-29 in literary and historical context, (2) examine the content and meaning of these texts, (3) account for both texts in arriving at an interpretation.

1 Tim 2:11-15: Literary and Historical Context

How is 1 Tim 2:11-15 to be understood within the book as a whole? What was the occasion for writing this letter? From the letter itself we learn that Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus as his representative in order to deal with certain false teachers. This is expressed in the purpose-statement at the beginning and reiterated at the end of the letter (1:3-7; 6:3-10, 20-21). This concern is continued in chapters 2 and 3, where Paul deals with conduct at meetings for worship and the character of church leaders; interpreters point to this as an early "manual of church order." On this view 1 Timothy is understood as a church manual which can largely be interpreted apart from its own original situation.

The letter as a whole is concerned with the destructive influence of the false teachers. And contrary to the situation in Galatia or Corinth where the problem was caused by outsiders (Gal 2:4; 2 Cor 11:4), in Ephesus as reflected in 1 Timothy, there is every indication that the false teachers came from the inside. They were active as teachers (1:3; 6:3, 7); probably two of the leaders are named and have already been disfellowshipped (1:19, 20). This helps to account for the character of the letter itself: directed to the needs of the church but addressed to Timothy. Because of the defections the church could not be counted on to act together in dealing with the problem. If the problem included leaders themselves, this would explain the emphasis in the letter on the character and qualifications of those called to serve and the careful instruction on discipline of those leaders who persist in sin (5:17-22).

Further, 2 Tim 3:6-9 shows a clear connection between the women and the false teachers; no other group in the church is explicitly named as being attracted or as providing an opening to the false teaching.