

*Encountering God
in Tyrannical Texts*

Reflections on Paul, Women,
and the Authority of Scripture

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Introduction

If reading the Bible does not raise profound problems for you as a modern reader, then check with your doctor and inquire about the symptoms of brain-death.

Robert P. Carroll¹

I have loved the Bible and been in conversation with it for as long as I can remember. In fact, my relationship with it was established well before I could read, and my earliest impressions of it were formed by a song—one of the first taught to me by my parents and grandparents and legions of faithful Sunday school teachers: “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know, for the Bible Tells Me So.” The words of that song impressed themselves upon my mind and heart throughout my Wonderbread years and led me to embrace the Bible as the story of a love affair—the story of the love that God in Christ had for me, for all people around the world, and for the whole creation. That conviction became foundational for all my later encounters with the Bible and is one I have never relinquished.

But loving the Bible and sustaining a lifelong relationship with it does not entail checking one’s brain at the door. It does not require agreement with, or acquiescence to, everything it has to say. In fact, many thoughtful people who honor the Bible nonetheless relate to Robert Carroll’s frank observation: reading an ancient document like the Bible cannot help but raise profound problems for them. And among those problems (and the one that will concern us in this volume) are “tyrannical texts”—that is, texts that have proved to be profoundly oppressive in the lives of many people. The Bible is a profoundly liberating document, but there is no denying that it also contains deeply problematic texts—indeed, “texts of terror”² that have adversely impacted the lives of women, slaves, Jews, Palestinians, Native Americans, and gays (to mention but a few). Such texts and prevalent interpretations of them may be described as “tyrannical” in the sense that they have legitimated the right of some to exercise unjust power or control over others. They are “tyrannical” in the sense that they have circumscribed human lives and possibilities, functioning (and in many cases, continuing to function) as instruments of oppression.

So what is a thinking person who honors Scripture and strives to be faithful to it to do with such texts? How might one offer alternative

interpretations of them? And in what sense do they function “authoritatively” in our lives as “holy” Scripture—as media that bring us into encounter with the living God? These questions are at the heart of this volume, which has several objectives. One is to provide in-depth study of texts within the Pauline tradition that have circumscribed the lives and ministries of women throughout Christian history. Some are from letters that the apostle Paul himself wrote (from what scholars refer to as his “undisputed”³ letters); others are from letters that are understood by most scholars (and in this volume) to have been written in Paul’s name after his death in order to honor and update his legacy and bring it to bear on new circumstances. The latter (referred to as “disputed,”⁴ or “deuteropauline,”⁵ letters), which seek to continue Paul’s heritage, are no less “authoritative” for the life of the church than the former, for their authority derives not from their authorship but from their canonical status. They achieved canonical status because the early Christian community, during the formative centuries of its existence, found them to resonate with apostolic teaching and came to revere them for the power they displayed in engendering, sustaining, and guiding Christian faith.⁶ Our engagement with all of these texts, Pauline and deuteropauline, will be deepened and broadened by new questions, insights, and perspectives that feminist biblical scholarship has brought to a reading of them. We can learn a great deal from these texts and from this scholarship about early Christian women and their contributions to the formation and expansion of the early church.

A second objective is to provide strategies for engaging problematic, tyrannical texts with integrity—that is, without dismissing them, whitewashing them, or acquiescing to them—and as potential sources of edification for the church. While texts that have adversely impacted women’s lives will serve as test cases, I hope the recommended strategies will prove to be helpful for wrestling with other texts that readers deem problematic and oppressive. I also hope they will encourage and facilitate direct and public engagement with texts that are often dismissed or ignored in mainline churches—precisely because they are regarded as “tyrannical” and, frankly, “canonical embarrassments.”⁷

Finally, I hope engagement with the texts featured in this volume will help readers think deeply about the nature and authority of Scripture and how they live out their relationship with it. In fact, one of the most helpful things about wrestling with tyrannical texts is that they force us to articulate clearly how we understand the nature and authority of Scripture. When we avoid such texts, we deprive ourselves, and

our congregations, of the opportunity to think through, and to think deeply about, our relationship with the Bible and how God is present in our engagement with it. In other words, we miss opportunities to grow in understanding, to mature in faith.

Six texts from the Pauline tradition will be featured in the pages that follow. The first chapter, “Beyond Textual Harassment: Engaging Tyrannical Texts,” will introduce the study and recommend strategies for engagement with tyrannical texts, taking 1 Timothy 2:8–15 as a test case—the most frequently quoted text in the Pastoral Epistles and the pivotal biblical text in ongoing ecclesial controversies over the role of women in church and society. The second chapter, “Wives Be Subject? Articulating Biblical Authority,” is also introductory and aims to help readers think through their understanding of biblical authority in conversation with Ephesians 5:21–33—the most fully developed argument in the New Testament for gender hierarchy and a text that has proved to be hazardous to women’s health and survival. The third and fourth chapters, “Women and Worship Wars,” will wrestle with 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 (the only assertion of gender hierarchy in Paul’s undisputed letters and arguably the most obscure words he ever wrote) and 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36 (which for most of Christian history has been used to deny women participation and leadership in the Christian community). These chapters, necessarily the longest, will also address important shifts in recent study of “Paul and women” (as the topic has often been framed) that can expand our engagement with these texts. In addition, they will review classic principles of biblical interpretation that can help us argue with contentious texts with integrity. The fifth chapter, “Reining in Rambunctious Widows,” will consider 1 Timothy 5:3–16, a text that represents the longest discussion of widows in the New Testament and aims to curtail their activity and diminish their influence in the life of the Christian community. Finally, chapter 6, “Women in Ministry,” will engage Romans 16:1–16, a non-tyrannical and largely overlooked text that serves as an important counterpoint to all the other texts featured in this volume.

This book emerges out of my own wrestling with these texts and is written for those who, like me, have struggled with them and with what it means to speak of biblical authority in their presence. Who might such readers be? I have written the book with a variety of readers in mind: female and male, including church professionals (pastors and educators) as well as lay readers—any who engage in serious study of biblical texts. I hope, for example, that it will be a resource for

preachers and teachers and encourage direct and public engagement with these texts in their practice of ministry. It can serve as a textbook for college or seminary courses dealing with women in the biblical world, Pauline and deuteropauline letters, or the nature and authority of Scripture. It is also designed for use by laypersons and groups interested in this topic and substantive Bible study of the texts in question. I try to present technical matters in an accessible fashion and include study questions with each chapter to facilitate group discussion or individual reflection. I encourage group study: reading the Bible in the company of others is always a richer and deeper experience than reading it alone! For those engaged in group study, chapter 3, the longest in the volume, can be divided into two manageable study sessions under the headings “Listening to the Text” and “Dialogue with the Text.” I hope all readers will find this book a useful resource that will facilitate engagement with problematic texts and prompt reflection on their import for Christian life, faith, and renewal.

*Beyond Textual Harassment:
Engaging Tyrannical Texts*

1 Timothy 2:8–15

I have been spending a good bit of my time of late musing over the question of what to do with problematic, offensive, downright tyrannical texts in the Bible—a book we describe as “holy” and revere as “authoritative,” as “normative” in some sense for Christian faith and practice. And I’d like to pose a question for reflection that, I think, gets to the heart of the matter: *Is there any biblical text that you would reject?* Ellen Davis of Duke Divinity School says that when this question was posed to her by a colleague, she could not get it out of her mind: “What should we in the church do with biblical texts that do not seem to accord with a well-considered understanding of the Christian faith? . . . Is there a point,” she asks, “at which we have to give up the struggle and admit that in this case edification is not possible? That this particular biblical text must be repudiated as a potential source of valid theological insight? That it is disqualified for public or authoritative reading in the church?”¹

It seems to me an important question for mainline Christians to consider. I confess that it is one I have wrestled with my whole life. At one time I thought I had an answer, a solution to the problem—for there have been rough moments in my relationship with the Bible, particularly during my teenage years, when I began to read the Bible with some seriousness and found myself tremendously insulted by what I thought at the time to be Paul’s view of women. For example, I didn’t care for the fact that in 1 Corinthians we read that it is shameful

for women to speak in church gatherings (14:35), or for the fact that Corinthian men appeared to be advised that “it is well for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1). Nor was I fond of 1 Timothy, which commands that no woman is “to teach or have authority over a man” (2:12). Women, rather, are told to be silent and submissive and to earn their salvation by bearing children (2:15). So much for justification by grace through faith alone!

I had a solution to this problem: it was simply to take my magic marker, “X” these portions out of my Bible, and then record obscene remarks about the apostle Paul in the margins for future reference. But even that did not suffice when I came to Ephesians 5: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands” (5:22–24). When I came to Ephesians 5, I got out the scissors. These were words that had to be forcibly removed—excised, banished from my personal canon of Scripture. It was, I suppose, my first experience of “textual harassment,”² though it was not my last, for the Bible is full of repellant, tyrannical texts—texts that have proved to be “texts of terror”³ for women, slaves, Jews, Palestinians, Native Americans, gays (to mention but a few)—instruments of oppression. And early in my relationship with the Bible, it seemed to me that the best solution to this problem was to perform radical surgery on the canon. Of course, other and less drastic strategies, with much the same effect, were surely available and are more often employed by mainline Christians confronted with such texts: we can always simply ignore them, or dismiss them as antiquated relics and their authors as benighted savages.

But these no longer seem to me to be the most constructive ways of wrestling with tyrannical texts. *Is there any biblical text that you would reject?* I’ve been challenged by Ellen Davis’s own answer to that question: “No biblical text may be safely repudiated as a potential source of edification for the church.” She even goes on to say, “When we think we have reached the point of zero edification, then that perception indicates that we are not reading deeply enough; we have not probed the layers of the text with sufficient care.”⁴

Not reading deeply enough—now there’s a challenge! This challenge has compelled me to spend much of my time of late in the company of texts that raise my blood pressure to see if that might be possible—to read deeper, probe further, and perhaps find some word

of edification for the church in tyrannical texts that I have failed to hear. I returned first, of course, to texts I used to tackle with my magic marker and scissors in hand, and I invite you to consider one of them, from 1 Timothy 2, as a test case. As you read it, listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church!

1 TIMOTHY 2:8–15

⁸I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; ⁹also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, ¹⁰but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. ¹¹Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹²I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

The Word of the Lord? Thanks be to God? It is hard to say that without gagging. Recently, when I assigned this text for exegesis (translation and interpretation) in a New Testament epistles course, every woman in the class showed up that day in braids and pearls. Few texts in the New Testament are more painful to our modern sensibilities, and few have had such far-reaching, fateful consequences for the lives of women around the globe, within both the church and society. It has frequently been used to silence all women, to exclude them from leadership, to confine them to domestic roles, to legitimate hierarchical relationships. Indeed, to this day, it is the pivotal biblical text in ongoing ecclesial controversies over the role of women in church and society, in many quarters still justifying the church's exclusion of women from certain leadership roles. These controversies, and thus this text, may strike members of most mainline denominations in the U.S.A. as irrelevant and passé, since we resolved our own controversies over women's leadership in the church decades ago. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has been ordaining women as ministers of Word and Sacrament,⁵ elders, and deacons for some time and has long since moved on to other ordination controversies. So

perhaps it is important to remind ourselves that some of the immigrant congregations within mainline denominations still struggle mightily with this matter, as do other Christian communions that remain adamantly opposed to the ordination of women. Moreover, the global communion of Christians more often than not does not share our sensibilities about this text or our struggles with it, finding in it normative guidance—a rather clear word about the universal will of God for relations between men and women and leadership in the church, grounded in the very orders of creation. All of this suggests that it behooves us to stay engaged with this text as well and to be part of the conversations it evokes rather than relinquish our opportunity—and our responsibility, I think—to make a contribution to it, for a lot of people out there *are* talking about this text, rather loudly, and if we are not engaging it seriously, we are not likely to be heard or to make any impact on that global conversation about a text that continues to circumscribe the lives of women to this day.

My own newfound willingness to try to stay in conversation with a text I have long despised, to keep company with it for a sustained period of time, is indebted not only to Ellen Davis but also in no small part to a recent formative experience on a denominational task force appointed to wrestle with issues uniting and dividing Presbyterians (issues related to sexual orientation and ordination, which have roiled most mainline denominations over the last decades). It was an experience in which twenty Presbyterians—as different from one another as we could possibly be, who under ordinary circumstances never would have dreamed of hanging out together for six years—found ourselves engaged in a profoundly challenging learning experience in the art of listening. An important part of our work was learning how to lower the decibel level of our conversations—to speak our truths with love and respect, but also to *listen* to each other, to really try to hear and understand the logic and integrity of other points of view—even if we considered them misguided. The biblical text surely requires no less of us, for we truly are every bit as related by baptism to the author of 1 Timothy as we are to disputatious believers in our own time and place. We are part of the same church, the same family of faith, for as Joel Green has astutely observed, “To speak of the church, theologically, is to speak of its oneness across space and time. There is only one people of God.”⁶ The writers and readers of Scripture constitute one community of faith. What that means is that, whether we like it or not, the author of 1 Timothy is part of that family, a brother in the

faith, and that when we read his letter, we are not reading someone else's mail. We are reading our own mail, addressed to the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, past, present, and future.⁷

It is an ecclesiological perspective, at least, that has helped me re-engage 1 Timothy 2 with a bit more charity and patience than I was first inclined to do. And Deborah Krause's observation in her brilliant commentary on 1 Timothy has also proved enormously helpful: "Rather than an enemy," she says, "I like to think of the writer of 1 Timothy as a distant great-uncle. While he may be strange and even creepy, he is a member of the family and one with whom I need to learn to converse. If I deny my relationship with him, I miss an opportunity to better understand who I am and what it is that I believe."⁸

It also turns out that if we deny our relationship with him, we stand to lose invaluable pieces of our family history, for as we listen to this text, his is not the only voice that we hear. Indeed, as we engage 1 Timothy, we need to bear in mind a very important distinction, now axiomatic in feminist biblical scholarship: the difference between *prescriptive* and *descriptive* literature. If a text is *prescriptive*, we should not assume that it provides a description of actual behavior or practices—a glimpse of the community addressed as it really was. Instead, it presents the author's *ideal*—that is, what a congregation *should* look like according to his vision. So listen again to verses 11 and 12: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." Is that description or prescription? It is clearly *prescription*, and prescriptive material is often the best historical evidence we have that the *opposite* is happening! As Deborah Krause has observed, "You don't tell women to shut up, unless they are talking."⁹ You don't command them not to teach unless they are, in fact, teaching.

So between the lines of this text, we hear the voices of foremothers in the faith and perhaps other voices of those who listened to their teaching.¹⁰ Maybe some of those men who, in verse 8, are directed to pray "without anger or argument" were inclined to dispute the author's prescriptions for church order and his silencing of women and thus were presented with a gag order too. Deborah Krause puts it this way:

I have come to see that rather than a megaphone commanding silence, 1 Timothy 2.8–15 is a site in which there is an argument about who has a voice and why. All of a sudden the text has opened up for me in new ways. Where it had seemed to close doors, it now

presents possibilities. Rather than an edict to silence women, 1 Timothy 2.8–15 has become transformed into a debate about who can and cannot have a voice in the church. . . . The power to speak is . . . something women have fought about for a long time, from the very origins of the church. For its role, even unwitting, in preserving this argument I now affirm 1 Timothy 2.11–12 as "Holy Scripture."¹¹

Indeed, 1 Timothy 2 is a space in which that argument continues in our own day and invites our participation. As I began to consider these possibilities, I found myself admitting that my old nemesis might have more edifying potential than I had imagined—that these Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy and Titus), which have more to say about women and exhibit more anxiety about managing their behavior than any other New Testament documents, inadvertently preserve important pieces of our family history that would otherwise be lost to us, documenting the struggles of foremothers in the faith, straining against prescribed reality, from whom we can take courage.¹²

The effort to read more deeply, to try to discern edifying potential in tyrannical texts, should by no means ignore or attempt to whiten-wash the real problems they present. In the case of 1 Timothy 2, the problems are considerable. These are, after all, the best-known and most frequently quoted words in the Pastoral Epistles and the most well-known New Testament restrictions on women's behavior. Indeed, the text is remarkable for its stringency and the lengths to which it goes to prove the unsuitability of women for teaching and leadership roles—all the way back to Genesis. And there is no getting around the fact that the author's tendentious midrash of Adam and Eve's story makes three very problematic and questionable points. *Point number 1:* Women are not to teach or have authority over man, first, because of the order of creation. Look at verse 13: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve"—the first being more important. The author clearly assumes that the very sequence of creation, as he understands it, is a revelation of God's will that women are to be subordinate to men. *Point number 2:* Women are not to teach or have authority over men, second, because they are, by nature, more gullible, easily prone to deception. We see this in verse 14: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." Indeed, the Greek suggests that she was "profoundly deceived" (*exapatētheisa*), and the moral of this story, in the author's mind, is clear. Given this inherent character flaw, daughters of Eve ought not to occupy positions of

influence and authority, or else all hell breaks loose: men who listen, like Adam, fall into transgression. But the author concludes on what he undoubtedly regards as a positive note, an important word of reassurance and mollification. *Point number 3*: “Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (v. 15).

There is no denying that all three of these points are downright problematic, even “theologically and morally outrageous”!¹³ Genesis, for example, by no means absolves Adam, nor does Romans, which says, “Sin came into the world through one man” (see Rom. 5:12, 16, 19), ascribing guilt essentially to Adam—as does 1 Corinthians when it affirms that, “as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (15:22). And 1 Timothy 2:15, most problematic of all, is unique in the New Testament in suggesting that salvation for women is different from that of men, requiring adherence to domestic, maternal roles. It is a highly selective reading of Genesis. The rhetoric is way over the top, and the logic is strained. But by means of it, the author mounts a devastating argument, insisting that women who teach in public or exercise authority over men violate the limits of their place in the fundamental order of things.¹⁴ It is one of the very few theological arguments about anything in the Pastoral Epistles, and in the minds of many Christians around this world, it is an especially authoritative one because it derives from the creation ordinances, reflecting the divine will revealed in the very orders of creation. These deeply problematic affirmations of the text should by no means be ignored or whitewashed.

Yet this is not to say that interpreters haven’t tried! Various whitewashing strategies have been deployed to defuse 1 Timothy 2, to argue that it’s really not as bad as it sounds—but none of these arguments are convincing. One of the most common strategies is to celebrate the positive admonition to learn in verse 11: “Let a woman learn” (albeit “in silence with full submission”). Let a woman learn: one of the highest callings in the church! The author, in other words, should be congratulated for his recognition that women are capable of learning, and surely he implies that they may teach once they have acquired sufficient education. Some even translate verse 11 as follows: “A woman should learn in quietness” (e.g., NIV), or even, “They must be allowed to study undisturbed.”¹⁵ In other words, get this woman some childcare! I’m not convinced. At this point many commentators also observe that the admonition to learn represents a great advance for Christian women

over their miserable lot in Judaism—an argument that, unfortunately, is inaccurate, bad history, and thus very bad theology.

“Blame it on the Jews” is another, far too common whitewashing strategy, for when faced with really tyrannical texts about women in the Pauline and deuteropauline epistles, commentators are often tempted to resolve the difficulty by bifurcating the apostle Paul, saying: “Oh, that’s not the Christian Paul—that’s the Jewish Paul—a place where he couldn’t quite shake off his Judaism.” The good stuff, like Galatians 3:28 (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, . . . slave or free, . . . male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”)—that’s the Christian Paul; but the bad stuff represents unfortunate lapses on his part back into Judaism—points at which the author is “more Jewish than Christian in his thinking.”¹⁶ This unfortunate strategy also conveys grossly inaccurate caricatures and continues to contribute to the long, sad history of Christians teaching contempt for Judaism.¹⁷

Other whitewashing strategies appear with some frequency in commentaries on this text: the argument, for example, that this is a temporary restraining order for a particular time and place rather than a universal norm—a word of advice for a specific church struggling with bossy interruptions in the worship service and obnoxious, domineering women. A surprising number of commentators argue that verse 15 is not as bad as it sounds, that it does not actually speak of salvation through childbearing. Women will be saved, not by childbearing, but by the birth of a particular child—by Jesus, of course! Eve’s sin and that of all her daughters is thereby reversed with the coming and work of Jesus Christ. But the otherwise distinguished commentator who takes the cake, I think, is the one who insists, incredibly, that the injunctions in this text are a *blessing* from God, who *allows* women to be silent and thereby *frees* them from the onerous tasks of instructing and guiding the church¹⁸ (though admittedly, women might be inclined to consider this a blessing when trapped late at night in an interminable church council, session, or vestry meeting). I put all these efforts to defuse the text in the whitewashing category and would not recommend them. Most of them strike me as efforts to put way too much lipstick on this pig.

It seems to me that mainline Christians are more often inclined to one of two dismissive strategies: either reckoning that the text is an antiquated, historically conditioned relic with which we need not concern ourselves, or that the apostle Paul did not write it. After all, most scholars agree that he did not, that 1 Timothy is a pseudonymous

letter, written in the apostle's name by someone trying to interpret his legacy in a new time and place. But these are no solutions since the whole of Scripture, every text, is historically conditioned, as are we; and regardless of who wrote 1 Timothy, it is still in the canon. Its authority derives not from its authorship but from its canonical status.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH TYRANNICAL TEXTS

So if we're not going to whitewash tyrannical texts, dismiss them, or ignore the real problems they present, what in the world should we do with them? For the sake of discussion, let me recommend five things that at least are proving helpful, and more constructive than scissors, in my own effort to stay in conversation with them—five strategies that increasingly seem incumbent upon me as one who claims to honor Scripture and to take the Bible seriously as an authoritative guide for Christian faith and practice.

*Recommendation 1: Remember that “the difficult text is worthy of charity from its interpreters.”*¹⁹

I am indebted to Ellen Davis for this first recommendation, who says that “charity does not mean pity but rather something more like generosity and patience toward the text”—a willingness to contend with the difficulties.²⁰ In the case of 1 Timothy 2, this has required a willingness on my part to sit down and listen to that distant uncle who penned this text, to whom I am related by baptism, to try to understand what motivated him: Why was he driven to such rhetorical extremes? This is a point at which historical-critical inquiry can be enormously helpful. If I stick around long enough and take the time to listen, perhaps I can empathize with real difficulties he may have faced—even as I find myself deeply regretting the choices he made as he articulated a response to them.

As I took the time to immerse myself in this letter and scholarly conversations about it, I gained a clearer sense that the historical circumstances in which the author found himself were complicated. To say the least, he faced complex problems. For one thing, he was mightily distressed about false teachers, whom he believed to be distorting Christian faith and endangering the well-being of the church, for the letter is filled with angry polemic against them. It is hard to ascertain

the identity of his opponents because the attacks on them are vague and imprecise, on the order of name-calling, insults, broadsides, and conventional vilification. And we should never assume that polemic represents an accurate picture of opponents. But a few clues do present themselves.

In 1 Timothy 4:3, for example: “They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” Elsewhere the author describes them as overly fascinated with cosmic speculation: myths, endless genealogies (1:4), and what is “falsely called knowledge” (6:20); and he castigates those who “have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place” (2 Tim. 2:18). From clues such as these, most commentators surmise that the author had some sort of early Christian Gnosticism on his hands. It also appears that the author’s opponents and their teaching of rigorous asceticism, celibate piety, found a hearing especially among women—that the false teaching he counters had special appeal for them. We see this in 2 Timothy 3, for example, where the author says this about them (vv. 5–7): “Avoid them! For among them are those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.”

It is not hard to understand why ascetic teaching and celibate life had real appeal for many early Christian women as an avenue to freedom—freedom from patriarchal households and the hazards of childbirth, the leading cause of mortality among women in the ancient world. A close reading of the Pastorals suggests, in fact, that some celibate women and widows were banding together in all-female households—a development evoking a great deal of anxiety for the author, as shown by the urgency with which he instructs younger widows to marry, bear children, and manage their own households (1 Tim. 5:13–14). Perhaps these circumstances also shed light on the need he felt to emphasize maternity as a worthy vocation for women, albeit in overstated fashion as a means of salvation.

But the challenges presented by false teaching were not the only ones the writer faced. Clues to another complicating factor may be found in the dress code the author establishes for women, insisting that they “should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess

reverence for God” (1 Tim. 2:9–10). Intriguing questions have been raised about the socioeconomic implications of these words: Doesn’t it appear that some women in this congregation could afford expensive jewelry, extravagant clothing, and hairdressers to arrange the elaborately braided hairdos that were in style among wealthy women of the day? It is hard to imagine that many could afford such luxuries. Perhaps just a few women were in view, which raises a very interesting question: What if these wealthy women were major benefactors of the congregation, the ones paying the congregation’s expenses through sizeable donations to the annual stewardship campaign? We know that patronage was an entrenched feature of life at all levels of Roman society. Socially superior patrons provided benefactions, and their socially inferior clients in return were obligated to enhance the prestige, reputation, and honor of their patrons with public recognition of their status.

So what if a handful of wealthy women in this congregation, upon whose generosity the congregation depended, expected a culturally recognized return on their investment? What if they assumed, for example, that their donations entitled them to leadership roles? They could certainly assume this in every other aspect of their lives. It is an intriguing possibility to consider: that a handful of wealthy women were asserting their power, wealth, and status, butting heads with the congregation’s duly elected and installed, though socially inferior, leaders.²¹ Maybe it is for their benefit that the author affirms, in chapter 6, that to *God alone* honor is due (6:16). Benefactors, in other words, should not usurp that honor and should expect reward for their generosity, instead, in the life to come (see 6:18–19). This sounds very much like a critique of the patronage system.

Elsa Tamez has made a compelling case that this kind of power struggle is reflected in this text, between wealthy women and church leaders named by the laying on of hands.²² The author could have addressed such a conflict in a variety of constructive ways. But Tamez observes that he chooses, instead, to resolve it by invoking traditional patriarchal values to squash these wealthy women—to put them in their place. But by speaking in generic terms, rather than directly to the dominant women, he responds in a way that squashes all women, regardless of their class.²³ It is an intriguing scenario—one that suggests, at the very least, that the dilemmas facing the author of 1 Timothy were indeed complex and merit a measure of our empathy, for these kinds of socioeconomic tensions and expectations afflict the lives of congregations to this day.

One final complicating factor is worth considering: the pervasive anxiety reflected throughout the Pastoral Epistles about public opinion, the church's public image and reputation. In the text before us, for example, there is a notable emphasis on modesty and decency. In the chapters that follow, we hear a repeated concern that church officers be "above reproach" and "well thought of by outsiders" (3:2, 7). And in 5:14 the author insists that "younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, *so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us.*" The world is watching and suspicious of new religious movements, and the author is anxious for the church's "family values" to be on display. And what I think I have begun to appreciate, however grudgingly, is that far more than the church's public image was at stake. Its mission is also in view—its concern that the gospel receive as wide a hearing as possible and that no obstacles stand in the way. For nowhere in the New Testament do we find so explicit a statement of God's desire to save all, as in 1 Timothy 2:4, God's desire that "everyone be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth." Observable Christian living that gives no offense, provides no stumbling block is, in the author's view, of inestimable importance for the validity and spread of the gospel.²⁴ So this dynamic too was likely at play: the missionary necessity of maintaining a dialogue with culture.²⁵

If space allowed, more could be said about circumstances reflected in this letter—about the complex dynamics and varied power struggles its author may have faced. But I trust the point has been made: if we take the time to listen, to probe the layers of tyrannical texts with care, and try to understand the complex motivations behind them, perhaps we can cough up a measure of empathy for the challenges their authors engaged, even as we find ourselves regretting unfortunate choices they made as they articulated responses to them. "The difficult text *is* worthy of charity from its interpreters." But having said that, and having made a genuine effort to listen, remember that genuine conversation is always a two-way affair. This brings us to Recommendation 2!

Recommendation 2: Argue with the text, confident that wrestling with Scripture is an act of faithfulness.

By all means, argue with the text—engage it, address it, confident that wrestling with Scripture is an act of faithfulness, an act of taking the text with the utmost seriousness. Indeed, we have much to learn from our Jewish neighbors about this sacred practice of arguing with Scripture. As Amy-Jill Levine has observed, "The general sense in the

Jewish tradition is that one argues with the text and with fellow Jews about the text, and that in some cases multiple meanings are possible. Jews are more inclined to say, ‘I’m right, and you may be right too.’” Yet Christians, she says, “more familiar with the word from the pulpit, the hierarchy, or the individual (not just Jesus, but Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, etc.), may be more prone to seek a single response.”²⁶ Do you think she’s right about that? I think she is, and that we may also be more prone to passive engagement with Scripture: we may be far more acquiescent before biblical texts than we ought to be. In fact, Walter Wink may be the only Christian I have ever heard speak forthrightly about his own loud wrangling with Scripture. He put it this way, as I recall: “I yell at the Bible about its sexism, its violence, its homophobia—it yells back at me about my attachment to wealth, my neglect of the poor.” It struck me at the time as a remarkable image of the mutual address and critique that should characterize our engagement with Scripture.

Moreover, it is important to remember that the Bible argues with itself, providing a model for our own engagement with it. First Timothy’s is not the only voice in Scripture, and as Walter Brueggemann has observed, “To give any one voice in Scripture the authority to silence other voices surely distorts the text and misconstrues the liveliness that the text itself engenders in the interpretive community.”²⁷ So by all means *argue* with tyrannical texts! When confronted with one, don’t check your brain at the door, for God has given us minds to think deeply. Argue in the context of the whole of Scripture, bringing other biblical voices into the conversation, for this is not the only text in the Bible that speaks of women in the church, of relationships between male and female, of the means of salvation. It is not the only text in the New Testament that makes claims about life together in the Christian community. What about the presentation in Acts of Priscilla’s authoritative instruction of Apollos (Acts 18:26)? What about Paul’s own witness to the full, authoritative participation of women in worship and the life of the church in 1 Corinthians 11 and Romans 16, or his rather emphatic insistence on justification by grace through faith alone (e.g., Rom. 3:21–31)? Cast as wide a net as possible, and know that the commitment to struggle with biblical texts—to wrestle with them, even angrily—is a sign of our faithfulness to this book.²⁸

Argue also with other interpreters (and interpretations) of the text, for this, too, is a faithful practice by which we test alternative readings and discern compelling ones. It is surely worth inquiring, for example,

about the practice of selective retrieval when it comes to 1 Timothy 2:8–15. The text’s absolute prohibition of women’s speech and exercise of teaching and leadership roles is viewed by many as the New Testament’s definitive view on the matter. Verses 11 and 12, in fact, are the most well-known and frequently quoted verses in the Pastoral Epistles. But what about the text’s elaborate dress code and restrictions on external adornment in verses 9–10 or its contention that salvation, for women, requires childbearing and adherence to domestic, maternal roles (v. 15)? Why aren’t these admonitions viewed as equally decisive? What accounts for interpretive inconsistency on these points, for selective interpretive retrieval? Some regard the prohibition of women’s speech and authoritative teaching as especially binding because it is grounded in the creation ordinances. But as we have noticed, the tendentious midrash on Genesis 2–3 is itself questionable in many important respects; and as Daniel Kirk perceptively inquires, isn’t this giving “the last word to the curse of the fall rather than to the redemption of Christ”? Does not the subordination of women in the church “as a norm for all times and places undermine the scope and power of God’s redemptive work and of our own calling to make the church the living story of new creation”?²⁹ These are important questions with which to grapple!

As we wrestle not only with the text, but also with other interpreters (and interpretations) of it, they, too, are worthy of our charity and generosity. In fact, Ellen Davis identifies charity, “evidenced first toward the text and second toward those who read it differently from the way I do,” as a key interpretive virtue, declaring that a measure of “interpretive humility and charity” would go a long way toward fostering “God’s work of reconciliation within the church” in our collective engagement with contentious issues.³⁰ Collective wrestling with both the text and the interpretations of others is central to the church’s life, a means by which we discern what God is calling us to be and do. So wrestle with all your heart, mind, and strength. But as you do so, there is a third recommendation to bear in mind.

Recommendation 3: Resist the temptation to throw the baby out with the bathwater!

As deeply problematic and offensive as tyrannical texts may be, it is worth asking: Is there *no* blessing to be found here? Are there really *no* points of edifying potential? The practice of engaging them with charity, of listening closely, may surface more edifying food for thought

than we might have imagined. In the case of 1 Timothy 2, for example, we have noted that it preserves the site of an important argument about who has a voice in the church as well as important pieces of our family history that would otherwise be lost to us. But are there not other points of edifying potential to be discerned? For example: Are what we wear and how we adorn ourselves in worship entirely petty issues?³¹ Or should our apparel befit our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ? Isn't there something to be said for simplicity and modesty in a society desperately in need of these virtues? And are not matters of economic and ecological injustice implicit in the production of luxurious clothing and adornment?³² How might ostentatious fashion statements distract attention from God in worship, flaunt our economic status, and obstruct our ministry to the poor? And in a culture that so often defines us in terms of our personal appearance, isn't there something to be said for clothing ourselves, instead, with "good works" that give visible expression to our faith (cf. Rev. 19:8; Isa. 61:10)? I do wish women had not been singled out for sartorial concern. Men, too, would benefit from such instruction. Still, there is food for thought here. There is surely also something to be said about the integrity of the church's struggle to live in the world, rather than withdraw from it, and to stay in dialogue with culture for the sake of the gospel—however imperfectly the church negotiates that tension. And we can be grateful for 1 Timothy's robust theology of creation—its insistence, in the face of opinion to the contrary, that everything that God created—including food, marriage, the bearing of children—is good.

But positive dimensions of the text are not the only points of potential edification for the church. We do believe that the books of the Bible are guides for us, and as Raymond Brown has observed, "Part of the guidance is to learn from the dangers attested in them as well as from their great insights."³³ This, in fact, is Recommendation 4!

Recommendation 4: Learn from the dangers as well as the insights that biblical texts present.

In the case of 1 Timothy 2, discerning the insights was the hard part; the dangers are all too apparent: the temptation, for example, that the church faces in every age to silence dissident voices among us or to sacrifice the good of some of our members for the sake of our reputation or mission. The dangers persist, for before us is a text that continues to wield enormous influence, circumscribing the lives of women around the world and throughout the church to this day. And can we not learn

from the dangers as well as the insights? Can't we learn from evidence of painfully imperfect efforts to embody the gospel? I'd venture to say that we see a good bit of imperfection reflected in 1 Timothy 2, which (I pray) is not a cavalier judgment but one that emerges from serious wrestling with the text, in conversation with the whole of Scripture and the collective wisdom of the church, which now benefits from two thousand years of discipleship experience. It needs to be a judgment made with the reluctance called for whenever we find it necessary to critique and correct a family elder³⁴ (even a distant great-uncle who is, admittedly, a little bit creepy).

There is more to be said about this—about learning from both the insights and the dangers a text may present. But for now, I invite you to consider the former Archbishop of Canterbury's eloquent summary of this important point. Scripture, Rowan Williams contends, is the record of "an encounter, a contest, a wrestling":

Here in scripture is God's urgency to communicate; here in scripture is our mishearing, our misappropriating, our deafness, and our resistance. Woven together in scripture are those two things, the giving of God and our inability to receive what God wants to give. . . . The gift of God, the liberty of God, is passed through the distorting glass of our own fears.³⁵

He goes on to suggest:

When we listen to a passage that is difficult, alien, or offensive, I think our reaction should be neither to say, "This is the word of the Lord, so the difficulty is my problem," nor to say, "This is rubbish, we ought to produce a more politically correct version of scripture!" Our task, rather, is to say that the revelation of God comes to us in the middle of weakness and fallibility. We read neither with a kind of blind and thoughtless obedience to every word of scripture, as if it simply represented the mind of God, nor with that rather priggish sensibility that desires to look down on the authors of scripture as benighted savages. We read with a sense of our own benighted savagery in receiving God's gift, and our solidarity with those writers of scripture caught up in the blazing fire of God's gift who yet struggle with it, misapprehend it, and misread it.³⁶

It is important to name the points of misapprehension and misreading when we discern them, for errors, when acknowledged, are

indispensable to learning and have a role to play in the Bible's formation of the mind of Jesus Christ in us.³⁷

Recommendation 5: Don't let anyone tell you that you are not taking the authority of the Bible seriously!

Finally, if you are practicing the discipline of charity or generosity toward the text, listening patiently and carefully to it, arguing with it, being instructed by both the dangers and insights it presents—then don't let anyone tell you that you are not taking the authority of the Bible seriously! This, too, requires further comment in my second chapter (below), for tyrannical texts, more than any others, force us to articulate clearly how we understand the nature and authority of Scripture—how God is present in all our engagement with it, which is, after all, why we call it “Holy.” God is present whenever we wrestle with Scripture, both with and against its claims. So don't let go of it. It is holy wrestling. Hang on to that text, like Jacob wrestling at the river Jabbok (Gen. 32), and do not let it go until it has a chance to bless you.³⁸

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Is there any biblical text you would reject? What are some of the biblical texts that have most troubled you—ones you might describe as “tyrannical” or “oppressive” or “texts of terror” in your own experience?

What do you think of the five recommendations for wrestling with tyrannical texts presented in this chapter? Which do you find the most challenging, and why? How might these recommendations inform your engagement with the texts that most trouble you?

Which do you find more difficult: exercising charity or generosity toward the text—or toward those who interpret it differently? Why?

What has been your earlier experience with 1 Timothy 2:8–15? In what contexts have you encountered it? Has it impacted your experience? If so, how?

What strikes you most about 1 Timothy 2:8–15? What questions does it raise for you?

What new insights about 1 Timothy 2:8–15 have emerged from your engagement with this chapter? Why are they important to you? What questions linger?

What questions would you like to ask the author of 1 Timothy 2:8–15—or the women and men who were first addressed by these words? What questions would you like to ask those who interpret it differently than do you?

Would you be inclined to preach or teach on 1 Timothy 2:8–15? Why, or why not?

Share your reactions to Rowan Williams's striking observations quoted above. What insights emerge? What questions do they raise for you?