

Hannah Athanasiadis

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DISCOVERING OUR FREEDOM AND OUR GIFTS

Romans 16:1-16, 1 Timothy 2:11-15

Some of you may know that for the past two years I have been studying theology and training for ordained ministry at Emmanuel College, at the University of Toronto. And while I still have a few more years to go, thus far I've been truly enjoying my studies. Emmanuel is a great learning environment that is warm, inclusive, and allows us as students and ministers in training to learn and develop our own theological views. This is very important, because there are a lot of bible colleges out there that will try to impose a certain type of Christianity or a certain way of reading the bible.

So, as a student, I have been exploring what kind of minister and spiritual leader I want to be. Particularly as a young woman who is in a traditionally male-dominated space. Part of the way I've been figuring that all out is by getting educated on the Bible and examining different ways to interpret it, particularly texts that seem to contradict one another or are what I would describe as *highly* problematic for modern times. Our scripture reading from 1 Timothy this morning is a great example. And I'm going to be completely honest with you; it was texts like these... texts that try to suppress women from stepping into leadership roles, texts that seem to demonize same sex relationships, and that preach a type of exclusionary faith, that quite honestly really turned me off of Christianity as a religion for much of my life.

So when I dove into my New Testament studies, and I finally learned about the historical, cultural and literary contexts behind some of these scripture passages, it actually *blew* my mind, and completely changed the way that I engage with these texts. As a result, I have experienced a deepening of my faith, and I've become proud of calling myself a Christian.

And I thought - if only all Christians could understand the context behind these texts in the way that I'm learning them, we wouldn't have the kind of faith that alienates and excludes certain groups of people from living authentically and being who they are. Instead, our faith would encourage us to embrace our spiritual gifts and live as God created us to be.

So what I want to do today, is to share what I learned this past year, specifically about women in Paul's letter to the Romans and the letter to 1 Timothy, so that rather than simply ignore a text like this, we can engage with it in ways that *actually* reflect the truth of who the early followers of Jesus were, and who we as Christians are called to be today.

So let's dive in.

Now, both the letter to the Romans and the letters to Timothy *claim* to be written by the Apostle Paul. When I say claim, that word is important, and I'm going to come back to that in a moment.

But first, let's review what we know about the Apostle Paul.

Paul was a first-century Jewish Pharisee. According to his own writings, Paul never met Jesus in the flesh before he was crucified. But somehow he got wind of this Jesus movement coming out of Jerusalem, and thought it was complete blasphemy to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. So Paul made it his mission to prosecute the early Christians, *until* a blinding vision of the risen Christ led him to do a complete 180-degree turn, radically transforming him from a fierce persecutor of early Christ-followers to one of the most influential early church leaders. Some of you know this story very well, and you know that Paul went on to become one of the key apostles responsible for spreading the gospel of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire.

So many of our New Testament texts are letters that Paul wrote to specific early church communities that Paul himself helped establish, and these letters address specific issues or concerns in those communities.

Now, as mentioned, both the letter to the Romans and 1 Timothy, which are where our two scripture readings come from today, *claim* to be written by Paul. But here's the thing. Not all the books in the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul were actually written by Paul. In the ancient world, it was quite common for unknown authors to pretend to be someone of importance and authority, so that what they wrote would hold more weight. It was also a way that they could honour an author by writing in their name. Today we have copyrights and trademarks which mean that if you were to do such a thing, even if it was well intentioned, you would probably be sued. Of course, those systems did not exist in the ancient world.

So out of the two letters we have read from today, I can tell you that one was definitely written by Paul, and one was probably not.

Can you take a guess as to which one was written by Paul?

If you guessed 'Romans', you are correct. Scholars are generally in agreement that Romans is an authentic Paul letter.

So the passage that we heard today from Romans, which demonstrated how women and men in Paul's world led alongside each other, is actually a true reflection of how those earliest communities operated, what they believed, and how they interpreted the gospel of Jesus. And there are so many well-known passages from Paul that speak to this, that declare that all are one who believe in Christ Jesus. In the world of the church, according to Paul, gender does not matter, class does not matter, race, culture, even age does not matter. What matters, as far as Paul is concerned, is your depth of faith, your spiritual gifts, your willingness to use those gifts in service to the community, and your willingness to open your heart to the mystical experience of the resurrected Christ within you and all around you through his Spirit.

And maybe you've heard this all before, and perhaps for us today, that might not seem like such a big deal. But you have to understand that Paul's world was one that operated within a Greco-Roman cultural dynamic that was highly patriarchal and very hierarchical. What do I mean by that? Men were the head of the household, so they were at the top of the hierarchy, then came women who were expected to manage the household, then came the children. Then came household labourers, and then slaves. And while today we don't have clear class distinctions in

the same way, some of us perhaps were raised in cultures or households where a hierarchy like this still exists today.

So in an extremely class-oriented society, where the Roman Emperor was considered to be the ultimate father figure of the whole Roman society, for women to lead... for Paul to say that his coworker Phoebe is to be welcomed in Rome in a way that is fitting of saints... was extremely radical for the time. In fact, not only was it radical, but it would have actually appeared to be quite threatening to the structure of Roman society and would have been harshly judged by outsiders. People from outside the community would have found it not only a bit strange, but actually shameful, for women and men to work alongside each other, that slaves and freeborn, Jews and Greeks ate and worshipped together.

And yet these first-century Christians dared to be who they were called to be, and stepped into this radical vision of community.

Now our reading from 1 Timothy paints a very different picture about women, saying that women are to remain silent, and that the only way they can be redeemed from Eve's curse is through childbearing. So what happened here?

Well, firstly, scholars are fairly certain that 1 Timothy was *not* written by Paul. In fact, not only was it not written by Paul, but it was most likely written thirty years *after* Paul died, by a follower or admirer of Paul. This admirer was writing a letter to address specific issues in the community of Ephesus, which is where Timothy, who was Paul's companion, had been stationed before Paul died. So based on this timeline, we can guess that First Timothy was written approximately 35-40 years after Romans. So what happened in those 35-40 years?

Well, all the original apostles started to die: Paul, Peter, and their companions and associates who had remained in each of these communities. So in the wake of these deaths, a new generation of leadership was starting to form. Additionally, these early church communities were growing and starting to garner some unwanted attention from the larger Roman society. Remember when I said that some outsiders thought that women and men leading alongside one another, and all classes of people being treated as equals, was considered shameful? That's because the larger Roman society operated within an honour and shame cultural dynamic.

And there are actually many cultures today that still operate within this dynamic. Men are expected to bring honour upon the family through their work and acquiring of wealth, while women are expected to maintain the reputation of the family by fitting into a specific gender role and avoiding any so-called 'shameful' behaviour.

So in First Timothy, the author was particularly concerned about some of the behaviour that was going on within the church community in Ephesus, which was damaging the reputation of the group.

There were disputes over who should lead these church communities, given that the old generation of leadership had died, and there were also concerns about certain so-called 'false teachings' that were impacting many of the women in the community. While there are some

different opinions about what exactly these false teachings entailed, there are a number of scholars who do agree that these teachings involved an ascetic ideology, which discouraged young widows from remarrying and bearing children. So there were a lot of women in this particular community, mostly widows who were choosing to remain celibate, and who were shirking some of their traditional responsibilities, so that they could live more freely. And unfortunately, this was compromising the community's reputation in the eyes of the public. Imagine that! Women choosing to remain single, in community with each other, unattached to a man and a life of constant submission!

So this is what the letter to First Timothy is seeking to address. The author is essentially doing damage control. It's not that women couldn't lead, because later in 1 Timothy the letter does actually indirectly address female deacons or deaconesses, just like Phoebe was a deacon... but it was about encouraging the widowed women who were falling prey to these so called 'false teachings' to return to their traditional roles, so that the community could restore its reputation.

And unfortunately, rather than understand how the passages about women in 1 Timothy were speaking to a very specific situation in Ephesus, it became a framework for a larger patriarchal and hierarchical version of the church, which in many ways steered away from Paul's original vision of a collaborative and communal model. And this still exists today in many Christian denominations, where women are not allowed to be Bishops or ministers.

In Paul's world, gender was not a qualifying factor into what made a good leader, nor was cultural background, how much money you had, whether you owned property, or even your age. For Paul, it was what was in your heart, your depth of faith, that mattered.

So, how do we as modern-day Christians get back to Paul's egalitarian and charismatic vision of spiritual community, one that is inclusive and accepting and non-judgmental? Well, I believe that part of the answer lies in beginning to think about ourselves and others in terms of spiritual gifts.

I believe that every single one of us is endowed with unique and special gifts. These are ways in which the Holy Spirit uses us and moves through us. And our gender, our age, our life experiences, they don't necessarily inform what gifts we have, but they do form part of our identity. And by embracing these identities as strengths, it can help us to lean into our spiritual gifts even more so.

What if you were to truly step into the brilliance that is you? And I know that might sound cliché and you might think well of course I have some strengths, I have some things I'm good at... but underneath, most of us are so plagued by feelings of guilt and shame, of feeling like we're not enough... of living in the shadows of what other people think of us... that we don't see our unique brilliance, we don't see ourselves as spiritual beings crafted in the image of the Creator.

Every single human being has the Christ seed within. Paul knew this. And I believe that Paul had a gift of being able to see that in other people. When we begin to recognize how the spirit expresses itself through us, we can more clearly see that in other people, too.

So that's what I'd like to invite you to consider. Consider your gifts, your strengths. Where are you being called to serve in your life? What are you being called to step into, or embrace more fully?

The second thing I invite you to consider, is what gifts others in your life have. In particular, I want you to think about somebody that kind of gets on your nerves, maybe even somebody here at church! We all have those people in our lives, whether it's our fellow congregant, or our partner, our parents, even our kids... we love them... but they can also annoy us, right? So next time you see this person, I want you to think about the special gifts they have... What do you love or value about this person?

Perhaps if we are more able to recognize our own gifts, and the gifts in others, perhaps then, we could truly reclaim Paul's vision of being a faith community that honours people for who they are, and that understands scripture in ways that are liberating and non-judgmental.

To embrace this vision however, we're going to need to do away with the honour and shame dynamics that still plague our psyches today. Many of us still care deeply about what others think of us. We care about our reputation. We don't want to 'dishonour' our families. What if we were to liberate ourselves from the constraints of society's expectations?

Beyond gender, beyond age, beyond cultural and political division and hierarchy. This is the kind of Christianity that I want to be a part of. What about you?

Amen.