ETHICAL PREACHING?: AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE TO FEMINIST CRITICISMS OF THEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY IN 2 TIMOTHY

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How might you respond if the claim confronted you that the famous command to “preach the word” in the midst of theological opposition in 2 Timothy 4:2 was unethical and oppressive? In reading 2 Timothy sympathetically, as a guide for theology and praxis today in our church and our world, do we imbibe dehumanizing and oppressive behaviors from the text?

In this paper I will address such critical feminist claims against assertions of theological authority in 2 Timothy from an evangelical perspective. It is important to address these claims because they cut directly to the issue of the Bible’s authority over against other voices in our culture, particularly with respect to our own practices of evangelism, preaching, and teaching. Through a critical engagement with feminist scholars, I will argue in this paper that 2 Timothy is neither unethical nor oppressive. Instead, 2 Timothy presents us with a model for interaction with opponents founded on enduring love of the “other” and a firm commitment to the exclusive truth of the gospel. This model is extremely relevant for the church’s work in evangelism, preaching, and teaching in the midst of relativism, heterodoxy, and competing truth claims in our day.

By interacting with feminist readers particularly, through a close reading of the text, we find that 2 Timothy 1) challenges the feminist reading for not accounting for the whole picture, and 2) challenges our own selective misreading that might see a biblical precedent for unconditional exclusion and labeling of those who oppose the gospel without loving, critical engagement and evangelistic outreach. The value, therefore, of interacting with critical feminist perspectives as evangelicals is in recognizing where our own, errant, readings of God’s inerrant Word might need correction. This does not mean that feminist criticism becomes a greater authority than God’s word, but rather that by interacting with feminist criticism we might see and respond to God’s Word better. The paper is divided into two major sections: 1) an overview of critical feminist concerns, and 2) my response.

**Critical Feminist Concerns with Rhetorical and Theological Othering in 2 Timothy**

In this section, the primary question that I will seek to answer is “Why are 2 Timothy’s claims to theological authority ethically problematic?” I will explain a representative answer to this question by appealing to the work of five of critical feminist scholars.
According to the influential view of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, texts like the letters of Paul “create a world in which those whose arguments they oppose either become the ‘deviant others’ or are no longer heard at all,” demanding an emancipatory reconstruction of the history behind the ideological text that takes account of the silenced voices, rather than simply “naturalizing” or reproducing the rhetorical strategies and distinctions on the surface of the text itself by taking the text at face-value. Because of the text’s rhetorical nature, “one cannot simply follow the directives for reading that are inscribed in the surface of the Pauline text.” In this view, a “hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed” operates to provide a “less distorted understanding” of historical social relationships than the more distorted understandings held by those in the “master position.” Rather than giving up all hope of a more valid historical reconstruction in light of postmodern doubt, the goal of such reading is to “break the hold of the androcentric text over the religious and historical imagination of its readers.”

Regarding 2 Timothy, then, one must beware of supporting the kyriarchal distinctions of “insider” and “outsider” in the text by taking them as simply accurate representations of reality. Instead one should seek to reconstruct the historical reality behind the kyriocentric rhetoric.

The rhetorical strategy of the author of 2 Timothy, as understood within this critical feminist interpretive framework, receives a lot of attention in feminist readings of the Pastoral letters. In this short paper, I want to focus simply on whether the claims to theological authority (including commands to preach and teach, and commands to “avoid” the opponents and/or their ideas because of their corrupting potential) in 2 Timothy 4:2–5 and elsewhere (2:14–17, 23–26; 1:8–9; 2:2, 23–26, 25) are based on an androcentric or kyriarchal perspective that reinforces patriarchal hierarchies of power and control.

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1 As presented representatively in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 141–142.
4 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 141.
7 A term coined by Schüssler Fiorenza: “Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression.” Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 118. This concept, therefore, is broader than patriarchy, and includes the intersection of racism, classism, ageism, etc.
3:1–9) are unethical and exhibit oppression. The central reason why such claims in 2 Timothy are seen as ethically problematic is that they oppressively categorize the opponents as the “other” by 1) falsely claiming exclusive apostolic authority for a particular theological vision as a means to achieve power over another group that has equal claims, and 2) by demonizing, silencing, and marginalizing the opponents as evil and in need of correction.

Regarding claims of apostolicity, Linda M. Maloney views the overall situation of the pastorals as one in which a pseudepigraphical author (a “frightened would-be authority on the defensive”8 in the last decade of the first century or later) posing as “Paul” is seeking “to establish a “rival ‘Pauline’ authoritative tradition”9 over against other competing groups which were at least partially composed of influential women. Following Dennis R. MacDonald,10 Maloney reconstructs the opponents as claiming Pauline traditions for justification of their theological way of life, similar to those found in the Acts of Paul and Thecla that emphasized the independence and leadership of women. Elsa Tamez, another feminist biblical scholar, agrees and notes, “We know that at that time there was no canon or unified teaching…So the theological position of the author was one among others. It was not ‘the’ theological position of a pure apostolic or Pauline tradition…In fact, it can be shown that the ‘others’ who taught something different also claimed to belong to the Pauline tradition, as occurred years later” (as observed in Acts of Paul and Thecla).11 The Pastoral author seeks to squash these libertine traditions in the name of “Paul’s” sound teaching, which is simply the author’s socially conservative, patriarchal opinion legitimized fictitiously as Paul’s opinion.12

The second ethical issue with the claims to exclusive theological authority as seen in 2 Timothy is that these claims treat the opponents as “others” who are demonized by the author, evil, in need of correction. Lone Fatum argues that the Pastoral author’s strategy is to “define and

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12 Maloney, 378. Maloney notes that in 2 Timothy particularly, this connection of legitimate, authoritative transmission of truth from “Paul” to “Timothy” is emphasized. (Ibid., 375).
defend his own by naming and blaming the others for being just that, the others, i.e. the personified Other.”  

Instead of arguing against his opponents in the letters, the author chooses instead to encourage avoidance (Fatum cites 2 Tim 2:14–17, 23–24 as examples from 2 Timothy).  

The weapons used against the opponents are essentially social discrimination and derision, caricaturing the opponents’ behavior as ungodly and sinful and thus setting them up as an “axis of evil” whose teachings are self-evidently false in comparison to the “sound teaching.” This sentiment is also shared by Maloney, who observes that the Pastoral author “does not enter into discussion with the opponents, and even states his refusal to argue with them as a principle (cf. 2 Tim 2:14–16). His weapon is a bludgeon, and he makes no attempt to win over those who disagree. The situation of the congregations is – at least in the author’s view – so polarized that the only choice is ‘take it or leave it.’”

Likewise, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow argues in her monograph on first-century conceptions of gossip and gender that the Pastoral author casts the opponent’s speech as gossip in a rhetorical “othering” that devalues the opponents by applying this potentially feminizing stereotype (citing 2 Tim 2:16–17; 3:6–7; 4:3 as examples).

An Evangelical Response

As noted above, the arguments of the critical feminist reader arise from a radically different hermeneutical starting point, one of suspicion, rather than faith. On one hand, an evangelical might answer these criticisms by arguing for an evangelical hermeneutic, dismissing such criticisms out of hand as founded on the dubious assumption that one has the moral high ground to criticize the Bible’s truth claims in this way. Assuming this key difference, but wishing to interact more deeply with these criticisms, in this paper I would like to respond instead by taking a closer look at the criticized biblical text and its context in order to allow it to address these issues. In interacting with the feminist reading by reading still more closely, I

14 Fatum, 185.
15 Fatum, 185.
16 Maloney, 364.
believe we are drawn into a greater understanding and appreciation of the text as we defend it from such criticism. As we see the text fully, we find that 2 Timothy is decisively not one-sidedly negative as feminist readers claim; yet we also find that 2 Timothy cuts just as deeply against any evangelical application of this text as support for silencing and dehumanization.

The first charge against 2 Timothy, a false claim to apostolic authority, has two key points. First, the “falsity” of such a claim by the author of 2 Timothy is dependent upon understanding the author of 2 Timothy as pseudepigraphical, and that the author’s theology is markedly different from Paul’s (thus having little to no claim to apostolic authority). The arguments against Pauline authorship are summed up by Martin Dibelius and Hanz Conzelmann as follows: 1) lack of attestation in the early church, particularly Marcion’s canon; 2) a markedly different style of argument than in other letters (including harshness of condemnation and a lack of dialogue with deviant ideas) 3) the problems of fitting the historical events of the letters into known frameworks, 4) vast differences of vocabulary, 5) a change in church structure towards organization and hierarchy as a development away from the undisputed Paulines, and 6) use of traditional material in a simpler, matter-of-fact manner. Though space prohibits a full treatment of these complex issues, I would like to point out the following points of counter-evidence: 1) the style of argumentation in 2 Timothy is as polemical and harsh as some found in the undisputed letters (Rom 16:17–18, cf. 2 Tim 2:14, 16, 23; 2 Cor 11:13–15, cf. 2 Tim 2:26; Gal 5:12; 6:13; Phil 3:2, 18–19, cf. 2 Tim 3:6–9; see below for treatment on the lack of discussion of opposing viewpoints); 2) the differences in vocabulary are not so dramatic when compared to vocabulary differences amongst the undisputed letters; 3) appeals to church structure developments or emphases must take account of NT passages that indicate an already established church structure in the undisputed Paulines (e.g. Phil 1:1; Rom 12:8; 1 Thess 5:12), and 4)
reconstructed historical situations of pseudonymous Pastoral letters seem implausible. The falsity of 2 Timothy’s claims to Pauline endorsement of its gospel message is historically not the established fact that is almost assumed by these critical readers.

The second troublesome aspect of 2 Timothy’s claim of apostolic authority is that it is made over against a group that had equal claims to authority. We don’t know for certain, but it does seem plausible that the opposition in 2 Timothy and the other Pastoral letters could be an early form of an ascetic movement with claims to Pauline authority like that found in Acts of Paul and Thecla. It is wrong, therefore (according to the critical-feminist line of thinking) for the Pastoral author to claim apostolic legitimacy and thus power over against another group that had a similar claim to apostolic legitimacy.

However, this line of thought seems to reason: 1) there is plausible evidence of similar, counter claims to apostolic authority among “heterodox” movements which were involved in the social situation addressed by 2 Timothy, 2) therefore, 2 Timothy’s claims to apostolic authority over against a movement seen as theologically and morally suspect is oppressive. Putting aside historical questions concerning whether there was a truly similar claim to apostolic authority, it seems, according to this reasoning, that making an exclusive truth claim in the midst of differing opinions is in and of itself oppressive and ethically suspect. Two feminist rhetorical theorists, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin, argue along these lines when they envision persuasion as patriarchal. However, following the work of Elmer Thiessen on the ethics of evangelism, this viewpoint is nonsensical, as exclusive truth claims are simply unavoidable in human life (e.g.

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22 For example, how did the ploy to invent three letters as an authoritative endorsement of a late-first century, early-second century church leader actually succeed, after the figures referenced in the letters were long dead? If there is such a marked difference between the Pastoral and the undisputed Paulines, and the letters are so clearly written in the pseudonymous author’s interests, how did the pseudonymous author get away with posing as “Paul”? The whole enterprise perhaps assumes an unrealistic naiveté on the part of the church who received such pseudonymous letters. See Fatum, 189–190 for an example.

23 This does not require a late date for the Pastoral Epistles necessarily, such theological tendencies could have been influential from an early date, finding particular expression in Acts of Paul and Thecla. See Marshall, 50–51; Tamez, 59–60.


25 Thiessen is a Mennonite Evangelical Christian philosopher who offers both a critique of evangelism and a framework for identifying ethical from unethical evangelism. Elmer John Thiessen, The Ethics of Evangelism (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 22, 57–58.
identifying 2 Timothy as an oppressive document is an exclusive truth claim - it is exclusive of the view that 2 Timothy is not an oppressive document). This is an unavoidable part of persuasion and judgment;\textsuperscript{26} in fact, it can be argued that attempting to persuade someone about what is believed to be true is a moral duty of the persuader.\textsuperscript{27} Refusing to attempt to persuade about what is believed to be true could be identified as unloving, while “the genuine lover, on the other hand, cares more about the welfare of the other person than he does about his own ego, and therefore he will seek to persuade the other, but do so in a way that is both loving and just.”\textsuperscript{28}

Therefore, the key issue to determine is whether 2 Timothy claims authority (seeks to persuade) in an unethical way, i.e. by violating what Thiessen calls the “tolerance principle,” (a biblical ethic) or, in other words, by dehumanizing the opponents, as the feminist critics have argued.\textsuperscript{29}

Does 2 Timothy show love and respect for the opponents?

The two central claims (as noted above) supporting 2 Timothy’s supposed demonizing of the opponents are: 1) the letter promotes silencing and avoidance of those who think differently, rather than honest engagement; and 2) the letter’s rhetorical description of the opponents is dehumanizing. Due to space limitations, in this paper I will only answer the matter of silencing, avoidance, and lack of engagement.\textsuperscript{30} I will argue that there is counter evidence in 2 Timothy that speaks against the critical feminist reading quite clearly by briefly discussing the relevant

\textsuperscript{26} I agree with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in identifying all speech as unavoidably rhetorical.

\textsuperscript{27} Thiessen, 149–150.

\textsuperscript{28} Thiessen, 60–62, 152.

\textsuperscript{29} Thiessen’s “Tolerance criterion”: “Ethical proselytizing treats persons holding beliefs differing from those of the proselytizer with love and respect. (Original emphasis) While this does not preclude fair criticism of other religious and irreligious beliefs, it treats the same with respect, and avoids hostile attitudes or ridicule against other religions and worldviews. Proselytizing becomes unethical when it is accompanied by intolerant attitudes towards other persons, or when it involves hostile attitudes or uses insulting and abusive language when describing other religious or irreligious beliefs.” (Thiessen, 198).

\textsuperscript{30} Given the broader argument developed in this paper regarding “othering” below, I offer that the use of rhetorical topoi from the Greco-Roman world in an effort to persuade using stock techniques. Is such a rhetorical description fair? At what point does a rhetorical description become unfair and dehumanizing? There is no Archimedean point from which we may corroborate the rhetorical descriptions of the opponents (2 Timothy 2:14–17, 23–27; 3:1–9; 4:1–5) with their actual character in history. Even if we were able to observe the actual people engaged in the setting of the letter, differences of interpretation would still abound as to which group is theologically “right.” We cannot simply assume that the opposing group was more legitimate just because they are opposed and viewed as deviant, as suggested by a critical feminist hermeneutic of emancipation. Instead, I view these rhetorical descriptions as religious value judgments that are unavoidably part of human life; they are unethical only if making exclusive value judgments are unethical. See Knight, 429; Towner, 553; Marshall, 772; and Kartzow, 197–199 for the Greco-Roman backgrounds of 3:1–9, 4:1–5.
material in the four general passages that the critical feminist reads as oppressive: 2 Tim 2:14–17, 23–27; 3:1–9; 4:1–5.\textsuperscript{31}  

2 Timothy 2:23–26

This passage is set within a longer section of instruction concerning how Timothy should speak and behave to both insiders and outsiders in the situation of deviant teaching (2:14–26, but more broadly extending to 4:5).\textsuperscript{32} What is the reason given\textsuperscript{33} for the avoidance of “stupid and senseless controversies”? They “breed” fighting. Instead of fighting, the ideal “servant” (presuming a reference to leaders like Timothy here) should be “kind” or “gentle”, “skillful in teaching”, and “patient” or “bearing evil without resentment.”\textsuperscript{36} The participial phrase, “correcting opponents with gentleness”\textsuperscript{37} describes the way in which\textsuperscript{38} these qualities are realized. The action of “correcting” is a present tense participle, indicating an ongoing action of correction or instruction. All of these observations seem to indicate that Paul was directing Timothy to engage respectfully and dialogically with the opponents over an extended period of time.\textsuperscript{39} Timothy was to do this with kindness, humility, and patient endurance to all in the process of teaching/arguing with the opponents. These commands in 2:24–25 inscribe a respect for the other; they do not view the persuasive process as an endeavor to control the opponents, but rather defer the responsibility for “convincing” the opponents to God.\textsuperscript{40} Overall, there is a “conciliatory

\begin{itemize}
\item Marshall, 743–744.
\item I understand the participle εἰδώλιος in verse 23 as showing the cause or reason behind the imperative παρακατεύθυντο. See Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 631.
\item Arndt, Bauer, Danker, 240.
\item Arndt, Bauer, Danker, 77.
\item The word translated “gentleness” (παρακάτευθυντος), can be described as “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance” See Arndt, Bauer, Danker, 861.
\item Wallace, 628–630.
\item I find that restricting Timothy’s speech to mere “presentation of beliefs” as opposed to ongoing conversation to be unrealistic. Any time one communicates there is dialogue. Even making a statement of fact is answering an implied question. It would not require “patience” and “skill in teaching” to merely “state the facts” to those who think differently.
\item It might be argued that the negative view of the opponents as having been captured by the devil refutes my portrayal of such a “positive” appreciation of them. This theological description of the opponents is centered on their rejection of the “gospel”, and is similar to other exclusive claims in the NT (e.g. 1 Cor 2:10–16). I would suggest that it is not simply unethical to have this belief of someone, as a partial theological value judgment of a person. By saying “partial”, I allow for the possibility that the value judgment of the opponents in 2:26 need not be a complete
note...struck as the letter offers the possibility of repentance and reintegration of the wayward into the household of God.”

2 Timothy 4:1–5

I treat 2 Tim 4:1–5 as a structural unit in which a charge form introduces the section (1), imperatives are given (2), and the reason for them is elaborated (3–5). The solemn, eschatological charge statement of verse 1 introduces the five-fold list of imperatives that summarize the key injunctions of Paul to Timothy throughout the letter. In this context are the following imperatives: “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” The word “proclaim” or “preach” (ἐπικοινωνεῖν) occurs only here in 2 Timothy, and only one other time in the pastorals (1 Tim 3:16). “Preach” (ἐπικοινώνειν) usually has as its direct object the thing proclaimed, as here, but this is the only occurrence in the NT with the direct object, “word” or “message.” This command to preach the word means to proclaim the gospel publicly and evangelistically, and is linked thematically with mission in this letter (2 Tim 1:11, 4:5) and elsewhere. A pastor (Timothy) preaching to a congregation is not the primary setting of this command to “proclaim,” as the primary audience of the proclamation in 2 Tim 4:2 is the opponents. It is also important to understand what the most likely scope of meaning would have been for “the message” or “the word” (τὸν λόγον). The referent is the traditional evangelistic message of Jesus Christ handed down from Paul, which is repeatedly discussed in the letter and summary of the value of the opponents. Instead, their positive value as persons is emphasized by the commands to faithfully seek to persuade them of the truth.

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41 Fiore, 161.
42 Craig A. Smith argues on a form-critical basis that verse 1 is an epistolary charge form, and as such is an apostolic exercise of authority that brings Timothy into the “presence” of Paul, as well as the presence of God and Jesus Christ who are claimed as authority for the charge; see Craig A. Smith, *Timothy’s Task, Paul’s Prospect*, New Testament Monographs (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 148–166; esp. 164–165. The force of the charge statement theologically is to both encourage and “bind [Timothy] to his task” in light of the eschatological expectation of judgment, the appearing of Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God (Towner, 599).
44 Towner, 600. See references in fn. 9.
is central to the claims of authority. This “word” is the working content of 4:2, about which Timothy should “convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” The language of patience and instruction in 4:2 is parallel to the language in 2:24–25, which refers to patiently instructing the opponents, the “outsiders.” This conserving, evangelistic preaching of the gospel word in light of deviancy was a single pattern of behavior by Timothy for the sake of establishing or re-establishing the people’s connection to the received gospel, whether stalwart outsiders or wavering insiders.

The author leads into verse 5 with the contrasting conjunction “but” (δὲ), by which the author contrasts the behavior of Timothy to the behavior of those who stray. He commands him to “always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.” The command to “endure hardship” as the audience of his preaching and teaching loses its interest and actively opposes him recalls 2:24–25, in which the author directs Timothy to “not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone” (2 Tim 2:24). He is to do the “work of an evangelist” to draw others back to the “truth,” another theme which is also present in 2:26. These connections reinforce the idea that the primary audience of Timothy’s preaching in 4:2, 5 are “outsiders” who do not agree with the received, traditional teaching.

2 Tim 2:14, 16, 23; 3:5

In these passages Paul urges avoidance, but it is crucial to understand the reasons why the commands were given and to read them in light of the wider context of the passages just examined. With respect to 2 Tim 2:14, whom does Paul remind Timothy to exhort “to avoid wrangling over words”? Timothy should exhort the group of believers generally, the “elect” (2:10), the “insiders” who agree with the message of the author. This is the best understanding in light of the preceding context of discussing the “elect.”

45 Designated as the “testimony of our Lord” (1:8); the “gospel”, for which Paul was appointed as a “preacher”, “apostle”, and “teacher” (1:10–11); “sound/healthy words” which Timothy received from Paul (1:13); the “deposit” which was given to him by others (1:14); the “things heard” from Paul which Timothy was to entrust to others (2:2); Paul’s own gospel (2:8); the “word of God” which does not remain imprisoned even though Paul is imprisoned (2:9); the “word of truth” (2:14); “sound teaching” (4:3); and “truth” (4:4).

46 2:26 refers to the “knowledge of the truth” (ἐπίγνωσιν ἀληθείας) and 4:4 refers to the “hearing of truth” (τὴν ἀληθείαν).

47 See Marshall, 745–746 for a discussion of this issue.
words”? Rather than a prohibition against discussion in general, the verb “to dispute about words” likely means in this context to debate polemically about futile things amidst the believing community. The reason given for this prohibition is that such talk is unproductive and has a negative effect upon everyone involved in the believing community. This fighting over words is thematically connected to the talk described in 2:16 and 2:23, thus identifying it with the kind of thing that the “outsiders” would do themselves or incite others to do.  

The command in 2:16 to “avoid profane chatter” (cf. 1 Tim 6:20) is directed now to Timothy. The talk to be avoided here refers (like 2:23) to the actual content of the “opponents” beliefs, as seen through the eyes of Paul (included here is a brief mention of their belief that the eschatological resurrection had already occurred, 2:18). The reason for avoidance is that allowance of such speech leads to “impiety” in those who engage with it, the spreading of such speech, and ultimately the instability of some believers’ faith as a result. The command to avoid this speech infers that Timothy is to exclude it from the believing community, insofar as he is able. Similarly, the “stupid and senseless controversies” (2:23) which produce fighting refer both to the falsehood of such controversies and their disruptive capacity, leading to the command to “have nothing to do with” (2:23) them. In the same way, the corrupt leaders whose behavior and teaching “oppose the truth” and lead others astray (3:1–9) require a defensive avoidance (“avoid them!” 3:5) for the sake of the stability of the church. Particularly, these leaders make followers out of vulnerable women who were already burdened with sins and are presently led

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48 Arndt, Bauer, Danker, 598.
49 Marshall, 746. Towner, 518.
50 This word occurs with this meaning here and Titus 3:9 in the NT. Other renderings for περὶ στὰ στοιχεῖα include: “to go around as to avoid,” “shun” (Arndt, Bauer, Danker, 801).
51 Though the evidence is scarce, perhaps this points to the opponents’ asceticism or “other-worldly” orientation as a result of misunderstanding Paul’s teaching on the future eschatological resurrection with Christ (Knight, 414).
52 I read the γὰρ of verse 16 as causal.
53 Marshall, 750.
54 This word occurs only here in the NT, generally meaning “purposely to avoid associating with someone” (Arndt, Bauer, Danker, 124).
55 The attributive participle σεμοσεμνούμενων modifying the “women” (γυναικῶν) indicates an antecedent condition prior to the initiative of the opponents (Wallace, 614). This points toward the interpretation that the opponents took advantage of this weakened state in order to proselytize.
by sinful desires; despite their continual learning from the opponents, they never know the truth of the gospel.\textsuperscript{56} Such dangers Paul seeks to guard against.

In comparing these avoidance commands with the outreaching attitude presented in 2 Tim 2:23–26; 4:1–5, the bigger message which critical feminist readers do not see is that Timothy should, on one hand, seek to proclaim the message of the gospel to those who openly oppose the truth, but, on the other hand, he should avoid some of them and their ideas as a defensive move against their deviant teaching for the sake of the church body (again, likely involving exclusion from the believing, “insider” community on the basis of the negative effects of their behavior and thinking).\textsuperscript{57} Those ideas and persons avoided “are completely hardened in their opposition – the core of the movement … that can no longer be reached.”\textsuperscript{58} Yet they are avoided and excluded to protect the church; they are not dismissed completely, as seen above especially in light of the commands in 4:2, 5 to evangelize and teach the opponents \textit{in spite of} current and foreseen opposition (4:3–4; cf. 2:23–26).

In light of these observations, we can see clearly that Paul did not command Timothy to refuse dialogue with outsiders. Yet why did Paul not directly argue against the ideas of the opponents, as he does in Galatians, for example? The letter to 2 Timothy was written to Timothy, not to the whole church, thus not requiring as much detail and argumentation as seen in Paul’s letters to whole churches.\textsuperscript{59} Also, perhaps the later date of this letter allows for more time to develop a coherent and unified understanding of the gospel Timothy received from Paul.

If only avoidance and shunning of the opponents were the agenda of Paul, why would he command engagement with the opponents in 2 Timothy? I would argue that the motivation for such engagement was evangelistic.\textsuperscript{60} The “gospel” was at stake in the situation of 2 Timothy, and Paul is directing Timothy to endure suffering in this situation of deviant teaching for the sake of conserving and proclaiming this message.\textsuperscript{61} Thus the opponents in 2 Timothy are not simply seen

\textsuperscript{56} See Knight, 433–435.
\textsuperscript{57} Marshall, 776.
\textsuperscript{58} Towner, 561.
\textsuperscript{59} Knight, 23.
\textsuperscript{60} For the argument that the Pastoral Epistles have a “missionary outlook” in general, see Ho, “Mission in the Pastoral Epistles.”
\textsuperscript{61} 2 Timothy 1:8, 11–12, 13–14, 2:2, 3, 8–13, 23–26; 3:10–12, 14–17; 4:2–5, 16–17.
as rivals to be conquered and eliminated; instead they are in need of correction and instruction regarding the truth of the gospel message in light of teachings that have led some astray. Thus, they are objects of care and attention. It cannot be said that 2 Timothy on the whole engenders complete silencing and refusal of debate with those who think differently, unless one glosses over these emphases. Crucially, this evangelistic motivation is an interpretive key for reading the commands which speak of avoidance (2:14, 16; 3:5). Space is given for ongoing, patient interaction with opponents, though not at the expense of the welfare of the church body.

**CONCLUSION**

With this paper, I hope to have shown once more that the Bible can withstand criticism, and that a close reading of our text is always essential in responding to those who criticize our faith and/or the inspired Word that supports it. In engaging critical feminist concerns by reading more closely, we are drawn into a deeper interaction with 2 Timothy and become more aware of the wide hermeneutical differences between a hermeneutic of suspicion and one of faith.

Particularly, we recognize again that 2 Timothy presents a vital model for engaging opponents of the gospel, involving: 1) firm, unquestioning commitment to the gospel truth handed down in Scripture, 2) trust in God alone for the fruits of our conserving and evangelizing efforts, 3) concern for the spiritual and theological stability and unity of the church in the midst of such efforts, and 4) loving, peaceful, humble, outreaching, enduring, relentless engagement in meaningful conversation for the sake of communicating the gospel clearly, even in the face of suffering. 2 Timothy speaks strongly against unorthodoxy and its power to corrupt and destroy, but it speaks just as strongly against complete silencing and exclusion of opponents as though they didn’t exist. We must always be on our guard to follow the whole biblical text, rather than selecting only those parts which support our preferred practices or convictions.

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62 It might be objected that this care and attention as based in proselytizing is unethical because it is paternalistic. However, the arguments presented above about the unavoidably exclusionary nature of persuasion would apply here as well. One can proselytize in such a way that does not require an arrogant or condescending attitude, and 2 Timothy explicitly commands a loving and humble approach to such dialogue.

63 In addition, these emphases seem to be in line with Thiessen’s “Tolerance criterion” (Thiessen, 198) with respect to how one ought to seek to persuade on religious matters.
The situation of 2 Timothy is not all too different from our own in America, in which we face tension between championing biblical truth in our world, and reaching out to our “opponents” meaningfully and consistently in the face of opposition and harm that may come to us. I hope that this paper has been an exercise in this ongoing process, one that has helped to respectfully and interactively answer some criticisms from those who think differently, and to encourage us all to dive yet more deeply into the study of our God’s Word for the sake of His kingdom work and the flourishing of His Church.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


