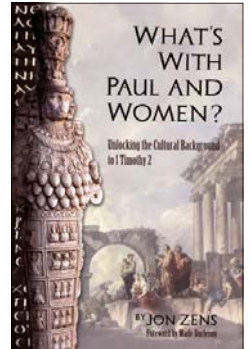


# What's with Paul and women?

## Unlocking the cultural background to 1 Timothy 2

John Zens (Ekklesia Press, 2010)

This slim volume has a modest ambition, to 'unlock the cultural background to 1 Timothy 2.' Verses 11-15, as Zens reminds the reader, are among those most used to exclude women from positions of teaching or leadership. Zens, a conservative evangelical himself, aims to show how if the cultural background is rightly understood, the 'conservative' view of male authority is based on a misunderstanding of Paul's writings to Timothy 'and is an outright denial of the gospels themselves.'



The book is very accessible, but that has strengths and weaknesses. The strength is that it is succinct and does not assume a detailed knowledge of interpretative difficulties; but that is also its weakness; the author does not always consider some of the nuances which other commentators note when dealing with this text and the wider issues of Paul's teaching on women.

After an introduction which briefly surveys Jesus' attitude to women, and other mentions of women's ministry in the New Testament (Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia and others), the book proceeds by a series of questions, which focus the discussion and make the book easy to follow. The first question is 'Why are 1 and 2 Timothy called "Pastoral Epistles"'. The author argues that to call them 'pastoral epistles' is misleading in the sense that readers too easily assume that Timothy is a 'young pastor' in the modern sense (and here the author's US church context shows itself strongly), rather than realising that he is an 'itinerant apostolic assistant.' Thus, Zens argues, '1 Timothy is not a universal church manual for a pastor. It is a mandate for an apostolic assistant to deal with some serious issues involving false teaching in Ephesus.'

Subsequent chapters look at why Paul unites modesty with female prayer, 'quietness, learning and submission', post-apostolic mistreatment of women, whether Paul is concerned about women teaching, why Paul notes that Adam came first, Eve's deception, and the significance of cultural context. Three appendices look at the Ephesian social world, new light on 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 (arguing that the restrictions on women are not Paul's but are the remarks of some in Corinth, based on the *Talmud's* restrictions on women), and a review article of John Piper's book *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood defined according to the Bible*.

I found the book both stimulating and in places irritating. For me, Zens shed helpful new light on the significance of the background in Ephesus in a number of ways. Artemis was the goddess of protection during childbirth; 1 Timothy 2:15's reference to women being saved through childbearing is thus intended to contrast the Christian God's protection with that of Artemis. I valued Zens' reminder that it was only a few steps from the Church Fathers' seeing women as inferior to men, to church-sanctioned wife-beating, and from that to 'national female inferiority' – the results of which are frighteningly highlighted in *Half the Sky*, the book I reviewed last month.

I found this book stimulating, but I am not sure I can recommend it wholeheartedly. I valued its pastoral focus – the author is a pastor, caring about women who have been hurt by what he sees as false teaching. I found some new insights. But I was concerned about Zens' tone in places, despite my sympathy with his message. I was saddened that sometimes Zens' arguments are over-stated, and that he does not give credit to the sincerity of at least some of those who hold a 'conservative' viewpoint.

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