

“SAYING WHAT THEY SHOULD NOT SAY”: REASSESSING THE GRAVITY OF THE PROBLEM OF THE YOUNGER WIDOWS (1 TIM 5:11–15)

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Abstract: *The prolonged discussion of “widows” in 1 Timothy is puzzling. Why is roughly ten percent of the letter’s total content devoted to limiting the church’s charity toward the χήρα? In this paper, I provide a fresh analysis of 1 Tim 5:11–15, arguing that the most probable conclusion is that these younger widows had been deceived by the opponents in Ephesus and were promoting their deviant doctrine. Because the younger widows were included in the circle of the opponents, and because the faithful Christian community in Ephesus was most likely supporting these widows financially, it seems that the church was unwittingly contributing to the opponents’ operation; they were funding false teaching. It is this very serious situation, I suggest, that best accounts for the unusual amount of attention widows receive in 1 Timothy.*

Key Words: *false teaching; opponents, Pastoral Epistles, widows, 1 Timothy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

First Timothy 5:11–15 is part of the larger unit, 5:3–16. The passage contains an early attestation to a special group within the church known as “widows” (χήρα; see also Ign. *Pol.* 4.1; Pol. *Phil.* 4.3). While many interpreters claim that Paul¹ here refers to an ecclesiastical office, “widows of the congregation,”² it is more likely

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¹ Most NT scholars today maintain that the Pastorals are the product of a Pauline admirer or “school.” See, for example, Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 4; Jürgen Roloff, *Der Erste Brief an Timotheus* (EKKNT; Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1988), 45–46; Lorenz Oberlinner, *Die Pastoralbriefe. Erste Folge. Kommentar zum Ersten Timotheusbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1994), xlvii; Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 19–22. I, however, am persuaded by the arguments for authenticity. Such arguments can be found in Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 35A; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 55–99; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 9–88; Ben Witherington III, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1–2 Timothy and 1–3 John* (Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 49–75.

² Dibelius and Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 74. See also Quinn and Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 426–30; Bonnie Thurston, “1 Timothy 5.3–16 and Leadership of Women in the Early Church,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff; London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 166–67; Benjamin Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus* (SP 17; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 104–5. David C. Verner, *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* (SBLDS 71; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1983), 161–66, finds three distinct sections: vv. 3–8, vv. 9–15, and v. 16. He suggests that, while in vv. 3–8 and in v. 16 the author’s concern is for the church’s social responsibility for the group known as widows, in vv. 9–15 the author speaks about the office of widows. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Structured Ministry of

that he has in mind a group of saints worthy of special provision.³ It does not seem that the concern of this passage is “to limit a particular *leadership ministry* for women in the church.”⁴ The author’s concern, rather, is to outline both the widow who *is* eligible for community economic support and the widow who *is not* eligible for such support. The question I wish to explore here is: What prompts such a prolonged discussion of widows?⁵ Over ten percent of the letter’s total content is devoted to limiting the church’s charity toward the *χήρα*. Why is this the case?

Herein I provide a fresh analysis of 1 Tim 5:11–15, arguing that the most probable conclusion is that these younger widows had been recruited by false teachers in Ephesus and were promulgating their deviant doctrine. I will further argue that these opponents of the Pauline community not only promoted a message that the author of the letter regarded as incongruent with the apostolic gospel, but that they also received remuneration for their teaching (1 Tim 6:5). Because the younger widows were included in the circle of the opponents, and because the faithful Christian community in Ephesus was most likely supporting these widows financially, it seems that the church was unwittingly contributing to the opponents’ operation. The younger widows may have designated some of the funds they received from the church for their teachers, those who had taught them “the things which ought not to be said” (1 Tim 5:13). Alternatively, the younger widows may have kept all the church-provided funds for themselves. Either way, because these widows were passing on the teaching of the opponents, it is probable that the faithful Christian community in Ephesus was *unintentionally funding false teaching*. This severe situation best explains the unusual amount of attention widows receive in 1 Timothy.

II. THE OPPONENTS’ PROFIT-MAKING ENTERPRISE

Virtually all commentators acknowledge the presence of opponents in the communities of the Pastorals; however, there is considerable disagreement with respect to the precise details of the alternative group(s). The false teachers reflected

the Church in the Pastoral Epistles,” *CBQ* 66 (2004): 587–93, includes the *χήρα* with the *ἐπίσκοπος*, the *πρεσβύτερος*, and the *διάκονος*; these are the four groups of “structured ministry envisaged in the Pastoral Epistles” (p. 592). Fitzmyer, however, is more cautious than most, claiming that the function of widows in the community is not explained (p. 593).

³ With Frances Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 114–20; I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 575–77; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 286; Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 271; David G. Horrell, “Disciplining Performance and ‘Placing’ the Church: Widows, Elders and Slaves in the Household of God (1 Tim 5,1–6,2),” in *1 Timothy Reconsidered* (ed. Karl P. Donfried; Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 120–21. Roloff, *Der Erste Brief an Timotheus*, 286, claims that widows constitute a *Stand*; they form an institutionalized group with conditions of entry and a pattern of life. They do not, however, constitute an *Amt*, an office for which certain functions would be appropriate.

⁴ Thurston, “1 Timothy 5.3–16 and Leadership of Women in the Early Church,” 159 (italics added).

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *NT Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 404, speaks of the “remarkably lengthy discussion of the principles for caring for widows in the church.”

in 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus routinely are treated together.⁶ The problem with this methodology is that the purported destination of Titus is Crete (Titus 1:5), while the most likely destination of both 1 and 2 Timothy is Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3).⁷ In my judgment, the difference in destination is a factor significant enough to warrant a separate investigation of the opponents in Titus.

Limiting ourselves to 1 and 2 Timothy, we are able to identify fourteen units that yield information about the opponents in Ephesus.⁸ Elsewhere I have analyzed these units and synthesized the data, arguing that the opponents' teaching is best described as an erroneous eschatological position that derived from the complexity of Paul's views.⁹ For the false teachers, “resurrection” was a purely spiritual event, one that had been fully realized in the present. This notion of resurrection likely led to a confusion of the ages: believing they had been raised, the opponents thought they were living only in the age to come. This eschatological formulation probably stemmed from the Pauline doctrine of the present new life in Christ; the opponents thought the only resurrection was the mystical resurrection, which took place at conversion/baptism. Immaterializing the believer's resurrection, which was tantamount to denying the future, bodily resurrection, was in Paul's assessment an attack on the apostolic gospel. The opponents' eschatological formulation also included certain ethical norms. The perceived consummation of the present age meant that marriage and motherhood were inappropriate. This idea probably derived from Pauline teaching similar to that contained in 1 Cor 7:29–31. Additionally, the opponents probably expanded some of Paul's teaching on food (e.g. Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 8:1–13), and devised some sort of resurrection diet.

Most germane for our discussion of 1 Tim 5:11–15, it is evident that the opponents had an active teaching ministry in Ephesus, for which they received pay-

⁶ See, e.g., John J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (NovTSup 35; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 65; Gerd Lüdemann, *Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1996), 135; Sean Charles Martin, *Pauli Testamentum: 2 Timothy and the Last Words of Moses* (TGST 18; Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1997), 202–30; Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the NT Writings* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 341–43; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, lxi–lxxvi; Frank Thielman, *Theology of the NT: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 408–13.

⁷ See the discussion in Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 206–9.

⁸ 1 Tim 1:3–7, 8–11, 18–20; 2:9–15; 4:1–5, 6–10; 5:9–16; 6:2b–5, 6–10, 20–21a; 2 Tim 2:8–13, 14–26; 3:1–9; 4:1–5. For a detailed discussion of method in the study of opponents, see Dillon T. Thornton, “Hostility in the House of God: An ‘Interested’ Investigation of the Opponents in 1 and 2 Timothy” (Ph.D. diss., University of Otago, 2015), 30–52. The aforementioned work builds on Nils Dahl, “Paul and the Church at Corinth According to 1 Corinthians 1:1–4:21,” in *Christian History and Interpretation* (ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Joseph B. Tyson, “Paul's Opponents in Galatia,” *NovT* 10 (1968): 241–54; C. J. A. Hickling, “Is the Second Epistle to the Corinthians a Source for Early Church History?,” *ZNW* 66 (1975): 284–87; John M. G. Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case,” *JSNT* 31 (1987): 73–93; Jerry L. Sumney, *Identifying Paul's Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians* (JSNTSup 40; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990); Jerry L. Sumney, “*Servants of Satan*,” “*False Brothers*” and Other Opponents of Paul (JSNTSup 188; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

⁹ See Thornton, “Hostility in the House of God,” esp. 282–330.

ment. In 1 Tim 6:5, Paul writes that the opponents “suppose godliness to be a means of gain” (νομιζόντων πορισμὸν εἶναι τὴν εὐσέβειαν). A commonplace charge against opponents in the ancient world was that they were only interested in teaching to turn a profit.¹⁰ Since this accusation was so common in antiquity, some scholars suggest that it cannot be taken seriously here. Robert Karris calls it “a stock criticism of the sophist,”¹¹ and Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann argue, “The opponents are here criticized with expressions coined in part by popular philosophy, but such terms do not yield any factual information about them.”¹² Jerry Sumney, also, is too tentative, claiming, “6.3–5 yields no new evidence about the opponents except the *possibility* that they accept pay from their converts.”¹³

However, there are three internal indications that Paul’s charge is substantial.¹⁴ First, 1 Tim 6:3–21 is carefully structured, with the accusation of greed (vv. 3–10) providing the motivation for Paul’s words to the wealthy in the community (vv. 17–19). Second, Paul has already expressed concern about the proper view of money among the leadership: an elder must not be a “lover of money” (ἀφιλάργυρος, 1 Tim 3:3) and a deacon must not be “greedy” or “fond of dishonest gain” (αἰσχροκερδής, 1 Tim 3:8). The faithful leaders of the Christian community are called to be different from the opponents in a number of ways, one of which is their perception of money and possessions. Third, the recurrent reference to financial matters suggests that the allure of wealth was a real issue in the community (1 Tim 2:9; 3:3, 8; 5:16, 17–18; 6:5, 6–10, 17–19). It seems best, therefore, to conclude that the accusation in 1 Tim 6:5 is substantial. The opponents in Ephesus were passing themselves off as “godly” in order to dupe others into paying for their teaching. Teaching was for them a profit-making enterprise.¹⁵

With this context in mind, I will now offer a fresh exegetical analysis of 1 Tim 5:11–15, attempting to demonstrate that the younger widows were most likely involved with the opponents.

III. THE REFUSAL OF THE YOUNGER WIDOWS (1 TIM 5:11–13)

Where Timothy is to enroll the type of widow described in vv. 9–10, he is to ensure that no church financial support is offered to the sort of widow discussed in vv. 11–13. The “younger widows” (νεωτέρας χήρας) in Ephesus are to be dismissed (παραιτέομαι, see also 1 Tim 4:7) as unworthy candidates of community economic

¹⁰ For the charge itself, see Lucian, *Fig.* 14; for the refusal of financial aid to prevent the charge, see Lucian, *Nigr.* 25–26; *Demon.* 8, 63; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 31.5; 32.11.

¹¹ Robert J. Karris, “The Background and Significance of the Polemic of the Pastoral Epistles,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 552.

¹² Dibelius and Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 83. Though, oddly enough, the authors go on to suggest, based on Titus 1:11, that the false teachers had gained “a following and an income.” This seems to me to be a very inconsistent interpretation of the polemic.

¹³ Sumney, “*Servants of Satan*,” “*False Brothers*” and *Other Opponents of Paul*, 266 (italics mine).

¹⁴ These points are developed by Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, 226, 404–22.

¹⁵ This is the translation offered by Fiore, *Pastoral Epistles*, 118: “they consider piety to be a profit-making enterprise.”

support. While the adjective νέος simply means “new” or “young,”¹⁶ the reference here is to women who are under the age of sixty (v. 10).

Paul provides the reason (γάρ) for the refusal of these younger widows: “for when they live sensually against Christ, they desire to marry.” καταστρηνιάω is unattested elsewhere.¹⁷ The simplex verb στρηνιάω refers to living luxuriously or sensually (Rev 18:7, 9),¹⁸ and the preposition κατά probably adds a component of conflict (“against”).¹⁹ In this case, the conflict is clearly with Christ (τοῦ Χριστοῦ). The basic idea is that the younger widows experience sexual desire²⁰ that is somehow in conflict with their commitment to Christ.²¹ It is explicitly said that this sexual drive leads them “to desire marriage” (γαμεῖν θέλουσιν), so the issue is not that the younger widows have fallen into sexual immorality.²² It appears that *the marriage itself* is the problem.

The decision to marry, Paul says in v. 12, would bring condemnation (κρίμα, see also 1 Tim 3:6) on these women. κρίμα refers to the righteous judgment of God, who repays all men and women according to their works (e.g. Rom 2:2).²³ Paul adds an important, yet somewhat cryptic, clause: these women incur judgment “because they declare invalid their first faith” (ὅτι τὴν πρώτην πίστιν ἠθέτησαν). Many interpreters take πίστις here as a “vow” or a “pledge to widowhood.”²⁴ David Horrell suggests: “Most likely is the idea that enrollment as a widow involves a pledge or oath not to remarry (i.e., of celibacy) and instead to be devoted to and dependent on the church, which is also a particular form of dedication to Christ.”²⁵ This would explain why sexual desire and the wish to marry is said to be “against Christ.” However, there are at least three major difficulties with this interpretation. First, it requires an exceptional (in the Pastorals) use of πίστις.²⁶ Second, it does not

¹⁶ BDAG 669 (“νέος”).

¹⁷ Schneider, “καταστρηνιάω,” *TDNT* 3:631, is incorrect; the word does not occur in the LXX.

¹⁸ BDAG 949 (“στρηνιάω”).

¹⁹ BDF §181.

²⁰ This is the most likely sense here, for it is less clear how living luxuriously might lead to the desire for marriage.

²¹ Quinn and Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 441: “They want to remarry whenever they feel attractions that are incompatible with their commitment to Christ.”

²² With Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 599.

²³ Büchsel, “κρίμα,” *TDNT* 3:942. Contra Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 266, who says that “the court of public reputation” is in view here. Since Paul has just indicated that the widows’ desires are “against Christ,” it is more likely that divine judgment is intended.

²⁴ See, for example, J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (BNTC; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963), 117; Ceslas Spicq, *Les Épîtres Pastorales* (4th ed.; EBib 39; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1969), 1:535–36; Verner, *Household of God*, 164; Roloff, *Der Erste Brief an Timotheus*, 296–97; Young, *Theology of the Pastoral Letters*, 119; Quinn and Wacker, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 442; Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 266; Fiore, *Pastoral Epistles*, 106.

²⁵ Horrell, “Disciplining Performance and ‘Placing’ the Church,” 121.

²⁶ See the excursions on the πίστις word-group in Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 213–17. Marshall points out that πίστις occurs thirty-three times in the Pastorals, and he finds five (overlapping) uses of the term: (1) the objective content of what is believed; (2) the activity or process associated with conversion; (3) the new situation or sphere brought about by genuine conversion (when used with ἐν); (4) a quality promoted by Christian teaching; and (5) the attitude that is necessary for the presence of Christian virtues. Pieter G. R. De Villiers, “Heroes at Home: Identity, Ethos, and Ethics in 1 Timothy Within the

explain adequately the adjective *πρῶτος*. Why would the pledge of widowhood, which would certainly come after the pledge to follow Christ, be considered “first”?²⁷ Third, in v. 14, Paul encourages younger widows to remarry. There appears to be little room, then, for an oath of celibacy.²⁸ Thus, it is more likely that *πίστις* here refers to the posture of belief in Christ.

πίστις is the object of the verb *ἀθετέω*, which occurs six times in the Pauline corpus (1 Cor 1:19; Gal 2:21; 3:15; twice in 1 Thess 4:8; 1 Tim 5:12). In 1 Thess 4:8, the term refers to the setting aside or disregarding of ethical instructions. But in both Gal 2:21 and 3:15 Paul uses the verb with the more specific meaning of annulment: “I do not nullify the grace of God” (*Οὐκ ἀθετέω τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ*) and “even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified” (*ὅμως ἀνθρώπου κεκυρωμένην διαθήκην οὐδεὶς ἀθετεῖ ἢ ἐπιδιατάσσεται*). Probably, the idea here in 1 Tim 5:12 is that, by making the decision to marry, the widow would show her faith to be inauthentic. But how can it be said that marrying declares invalid a widow’s faith? The solution that best accounts for the strong language of vv. 11–12 is that Paul is thinking of intermarriage: some younger widows who professed Christ were seeking to marry unbelievers.²⁹ In keeping with 1 Cor 7:39,³⁰ Paul here expresses his complete disapproval of mixed marriages. When a woman in the ancient world married, she “renounced her father’s religion and worshiped instead at her husband’s hearth.”³¹ Plutarch writes: “A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband’s friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions” (*Mor.* 2.140). Marrying an unbelieving husband, and adopting his pagan religion, would show that the widow’s “first faith,” her commitment to Christ, was not genuine. For Paul, authentic faith is faith that stands the test of time, persevering through the avenue of good works.

Context of the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the NT* (ed. Jan G. van der Watt; BZNW 141; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 367–69, offers a more concise account. He explains that, in addition to objective content, *πίστις* can be understood “not only as belief in God, but also as ongoing trust in God ... Faith in 1 Timothy thus encompasses not only entering a relationship with God, but a relationship that is ongoing in the actual practice of the one who believes” (p. 367).

²⁷ See *LW* 28:344; Calvin, *Comm.* 1 Tim 5:12.

²⁸ Ulrike Wagener, *Die Ordnung des ‘Hauses Gottes’: Der Ort von Frauen in der Ekklesiologie und Ethik der Pastoralbriefe* (WUNT 2/65; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994), 200–201, proposes that two groups of widows could be in view: one group that had taken the oath not to remarry (vv. 11–12) and one group that had not taken the oath (v. 14). While this is possible, it is an unnecessarily complicated solution to the problem.

²⁹ With Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIBCNT; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 121; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 600–601; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 291; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 352.

³⁰ For the view that marriage between an unbeliever and a believer is forbidden by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 (including, but not limited to, the phrase *μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ* in v. 39), see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 604. Thiselton writes: “To marry an unbeliever would indeed be to invite a pull in two directions and a lack of unified vision.”

³¹ Joel B. Green, *1 Peter* (THNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 92.

In v. 13, Paul makes an additional argument against the enrollment of younger widows. The verse begins with *ἅμα δὲ καί* (see also Phlm 22). *ἅμα* is a marker of simultaneous occurrence; the actions of vv. 11–12 and v. 13 coincide.³² The question is whether the actions are carried out by one or by two groups. I. Howard Marshall and Philip Towner suggest that two groups of younger widows are pictured.³³ The force, then, would be: “At the same time that *certain* younger widows desire to marry unbelievers, *other* younger widows are learning to be lazy.” While this interpretation is possible, it seems unlikely. Paul provides no clear hint that he is here introducing a new group. He presents in v. 11 the one group, νεωτέρας χήρας, and he here uses only the third-person plural form of the verb *μανθάνω*. The unstated subject of the verb is the one group that has been the focus of the discussion since v. 11. The better translation of the first part of v. 13 is, “At the same time also *they* (the one group of younger widows) learn to be lazy.”³⁴

The verb *μανθάνω* is used of women in 1 Tim 2:11 and in 2 Tim 3:7. The construction here is difficult in that the verb is followed not by an infinitive but by the adjective *ἀργός*. The simplest solution is to supply *εἶναι* to complete the thought. *ἀργός* is used eight times in the NT (Matt 12:36; 20:3, 6; twice in 1 Tim 5:13; Titus 1:12; Jas 2:20; 2 Pet 1:8). It can mean “idle,” “lazy,” or “useless.”³⁵ Marianne Bjelland Kartzow comments: “[The widows] are learning to be idle, a rather strange thing to learn, since being idle or doing nothing does not need much education.”³⁶ The point probably is that these widows have acquired a habit of laziness with respect to the Christian profession.³⁷ The participial phrase, *περιερχόμεναι τὰς οἰκίας* (“going about the houses”), clarifies the meaning of *ἀργός*. The issue is not that these women are inactive; the issue is that, though they travel from house to house, they do nothing for the benefit of the inhabitants.

The phrase *οὐ μόνον δέ ... ἀλλὰ καί ...* introduces an even more troubling aspect of the situation. Paul now describes the younger widows as *φλύαρος* and *περίεργος*. The first adjective occurs only here in the NT and only in 4 Macc 5:11 in the LXX. The term appears to mean “gossipy” or “talkative.”³⁸ The second adjective, *περίεργος*, means “curious,”³⁹ and, though it can refer more specifically to curiosity in connection with the practice of magic (Acts 19:19), there is nothing in the immediate context to suggest such a meaning here.⁴⁰ A closing participial

³² BDAG 49 (“ἅμα”).

³³ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 601; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 352–53.

³⁴ Also Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 292; Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 267.

³⁵ BDAG 128 (“ἀργός”).

³⁶ Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles* (BZNW 164; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 147.

³⁷ Bruce W. Winter, “Providentia for the Widows in 1 Tim 5:3–16,” *TynBul* 39 (1988): 96–97.

³⁸ BDAG 1060 (“φλύαρος”). See the additional references in TLNT 3:466 (“φλύαρος”).

³⁹ BDAG 800 (“περίεργος”).

⁴⁰ Contra Kelly, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 118; A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NCB; London: Marshall Pickering, 1982), 99; Lloyd K. Pietersen, “Women as Gossips and Busybodies: Another Look at 1 Timothy 5:13,” *LTQ* 42 (2007): 26–27. Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 149–55, offers a detailed discussion of the term. She concludes: “Rather than establishing two distinct meanings of *peri-*

phrase completes the description: “saying things which ought not to be said” (λαλοῦσαι τὰ μὴ δέοντα; compare Titus 1:11). Whether λαλέω refers merely to talking⁴¹ or to teaching in a formal sense,⁴² these widows are promoting a message that Paul finds objectionable.⁴³ As Luther says, “There are two sins involved here: picking up new doctrines . . . and planting that poison.”⁴⁴

Can we be more precise about the poison? What exactly are these “things which ought not to be said”? If we glance ahead to v. 15, we notice that Paul affiliates some of the younger widows with Satan. This suggests that the widows are somehow promulgating the doctrines of the opponents, which Paul has already classified as Satanic/demonic (1 Tim 4:1).⁴⁵ If these younger widows were, prior to Paul’s writing, included in the circle of church-supported widows, then it appears that the Christian community in Ephesus was unintentionally funding false teaching. If we recall vv. 11–12, however, a quandary presents itself. The younger widows *desire* marriage (γαμεῖν θέλουσιν, v. 11), but the opponents in Ephesus *forbid* marriage (κωλύοντων γαμεῖν, 1 Tim 4:3). How might we explain this?

This quandary has not been given sufficient attention by the commentators. William Mounce dismisses the issue rather quickly: “The widow’s desire to remarry is interesting in light of the opponents’ disregard of marriage (cf. 1 Tim 4:3) and the fact that the opponents have probably secured a following among the widows (cf. 2 Tim 3:6). This suggests that the Ephesian heresy was not a well-formulated doctrine but rather a collection of loosely associated ideas without internal consistency.”⁴⁶ My assessment of the opponents is that their doctrine was at least fairly developed and cogent. I have argued elsewhere that their eschatological misconception, asceticism, knowledge, and mythology are all connected.⁴⁷ Moreover, it is clear that the opponents had gained a following in Ephesus, so their teaching must have been at least superficially plausible. Thus, Mounce’s conclusion seems to be inconsistent with the evidence.

Marshall is more on track, though he as well has relatively little to say. “The desire to (re)marry (v. 11) may seem to be incompatible with the heresy reflected in 4.3, but, human nature being what it is, it would not be surprising if adherents to

ergos, it is perhaps more productive to understand the term on a scale that starts with curiosity and ends up with superstition” (p. 151).

⁴¹ See, for example, Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 603: “Their conversation is promoting false teaching in a less formal, but equally destructive manner.”

⁴² See, for example, Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, 510: “While the Pastor does not explicitly say that they are ‘teaching,’ this seems the most likely interpretation of 1 Tim 5:13.”

⁴³ Claire S. Smith, *Pauline Communities as “Scholastic Communities”: A Study of the Vocabulary of “Teaching” in 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (WUNT 2/335; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 119, states that the occurrence of λαλέω here “demonstrates the educational potential of all speech.”

⁴⁴ LW 28:344.

⁴⁵ The association of some with Satan could possibly refer to the desire to marry unbelievers, but even if some widows had already acted on this desire, there is no good reason to equate the *adoption* of the husband’s religion with the *promulgation* of it. Therefore, this interpretation of τινες ἐξετράπησαν ὀπίσω τοῦ σατανᾶ (v. 15) does not mesh well with λαλοῦσαι τὰ μὴ δέοντα (v. 13).

⁴⁶ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 290–91.

⁴⁷ See Thornton, “Hostility in the House of God.”

other aspects of the heresy eventually found the sexual urge too strong for them.”⁴⁸ But given the fact that the marriage prohibition is one of only a few of the opponents’ practices pinpointed in the letter, it is reasonable to conclude that this was a significant proscription—marriage was entirely inappropriate for a woman living “in the resurrection” (as discussed above). Therefore, it seems likely that the decision to marry would have been a breach serious enough to warrant exclusion from the opponents’ group.

I read vv. 11–15 as follows. The association of the younger widows with Satan (v. 15), combined with the reference to the widows “saying what ought not to be said” (v. 13), means that these women are promulgating the deviant doctrine of the opponents. Regarding vv. 11–12, I note that it is by no means clear that the younger widows have *already* married unbelievers. Since in v. 14 Paul urges the widows to marry, we may presume that they have the *desire* to marry but have not yet *acted* on the desire. It seems, then, that we have in vv. 11–15 a complex picture of a critical moment. The younger widows have three choices. (1) They can disregard their desire to marry, stay committed to the opponents’ teaching, and continue to side with Satan (v. 15). (2) They can act on their desire to marry unbelievers and, as a result, break from the opponents’ group, while still bringing condemnation on themselves (vv. 11–12). (3) They can marry believers, break from the opponents’ group, and return to God-pleasing works in their homes (v. 14).

IV. THE HOUSEHOLD AS STRONGHOLD FOR CHRISTIAN WOMEN (1 TIM 5:14–15)

Paul deals with the problem of the younger widows by once again (1 Tim 2:15) endorsing the traditional female role in the household. Although the adjective *νεωτέρα*s is not here accompanied by the noun *χήρας* (compare 2:11), the repetition of the noun throughout the pericope (2:3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 16) indicates that Paul is not simply exhorting younger women in general, but younger widows. The verb *βούλομαι* is used to issue a strong directive (see also 1 Tim 2:8).⁴⁹ First, Paul directs the younger widows “to marry” (*γαμέω*). Next and naturally, Paul directs these women “to bear children.” The biblical hapax *τεκνογονέω* corresponds exactly to the noun *τεκνογονία* (1 Tim 2:15).⁵⁰ Third, the younger widows are told “to manage house.” The verb *οικοδεσποτέω* occurs only here in the NT, and the term is never used in the LXX. The corresponding noun is *οικοδεσπότης*, which occurs twelve times in the Gospels (Matt 10:25; 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 21:33; 24:43; Mark 14:14; Luke 12:39; 13:25; 14:21; 22:11; see also Philo, *Somm.* 1.149; Epictetus, *Disc.* 3.22.4). The noun denotes the household master, and the verb denotes the action of “managing,” “controlling,” or “ruling” the *οἶκος*.⁵¹ It is clear that Paul wishes the

⁴⁸ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 580 n. 17.

⁴⁹ Schrenk, *TDNT* 1:632 (“βούλομαι”): “ordering by apostolic authority.”

⁵⁰ BDAG 994 (“τεκνογονέω”); Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 267.

⁵¹ Rengstorff, *TDNT* 2:49 (“οικοδεσπότης”). In 1 Tim 3:4, we read that the husband is “to lead his own household well” (τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον). Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 296, rightly points

young widows to devote their time and energy to family life and domestic matters.⁵²

Paul next explains the benefit of such a course of action. By reintegrating themselves into the structure and activities of the traditional household, the widows will “give the adversary no opportunity” (μηδεμίαν ἀφορμὴν δίδοναι τῷ ἀντίκειμένῳ). Paul uses the verb ἀντίκειμαι in 1 Tim 1:10 to associate the opponents with the wicked individuals of his vice list. The masculine singular participle here in 1 Tim 5:14 could be a collective reference to the false teachers, but Paul elsewhere uses a plural participle to refer to human opponents (1 Cor 16:9; Phil 1:28). Another option is that a single human false teacher is in view. However, having in the large majority of the letter referred to the false teachers as a group,⁵³ it seems unlikely that Paul now thinks of one false teacher in particular. The reference to Satan in v. 15 makes it more likely that he is the adversary Paul here has in mind.⁵⁴

Verse 14 ends with a prepositional phrase that clarifies the positive outcome: Satan will have no opportunity “for the sake of reviling.”⁵⁵ λοιδορία is abusive or insulting speech (see also 1 Pet 3:9).⁵⁶ The thought is either of slander, which is carried out through human instrumentality,⁵⁷ or of Satan himself as “the accuser of [the] brothers” (Rev 12:10). The context supports the latter. As the younger widows separate from the opponents’ group and return to the path of good works (v. 14), they will demonstrate that their faith (v. 12) is genuine; consequently, Satan will have no occasion to bring charges against them (cf. Rom 8:31–39). In v. 15, Paul is clear that some widows have already (ἤδη) turned toward Satan (ἐξετράπησαν ὀπίσω τοῦ σατανᾶ). But there is still hope for these widows who have been deceived by the demonic doctrines of the false teachers. For Paul, the traditional household is a stronghold for these Christian women; as they reenter fully into family life, these younger widows will put themselves beyond the influence of the opponents,⁵⁸ and they will suppress the accusations of Satan.

out that the balance between the wife’s responsibility of managing the home and the husband’s responsibility of leading the home is not clarified.

⁵² George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 228: Paul encourages these widows to “enter fully into family life.”

⁵³ The one exception is 1 Tim 1:20, but there the individuals are named, and they are used as an example of how to deal with the larger group of opponents in Ephesus.

⁵⁴ See also Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 605; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 296; Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 268; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 357.

⁵⁵ Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek NT: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 250, says that χάριν may indicate purpose (“for the sake of”). But see also Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 356–57, who argues that the prepositional phrase is causal. He translates the final part of v. 14, “give no opportunity to the enemy on account of reviling.” He adds, “In this case, an additional agent is implied, that is, some unnamed agent responsible for the act of reviling. . . . Presumably, Paul means those outside the community, and he therefore has the church’s public reputation in mind.”

⁵⁶ BDAG 602 (“λοιδορία”).

⁵⁷ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 123.

⁵⁸ With Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, 511; B. J. Oropeza, *Jews, Gentiles, and the Opponents of Paul* (Apostasy in the NT Communities 2; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 276: “The Paul-

V. CONCLUSION

The most probable conclusion is that the younger widows of 1 Tim 5:11–15 had been deceived by the opponents in Ephesus. The clearest indications of their involvement with the false teachers are found in v. 13 and v. 15. In v. 13, Paul describes the younger widows as meandering gossips, those who travel around “saying things which ought not to be said” (λαλοῦσαι τὰ μὴ δεόντα). Whether the verb λαλέω here refers to more casual conversation or to more formal proclamation, the widows were promoting a message that Paul found problematic. In v. 15 Paul affiliates some of the younger widows with Satan. This again points to their involvement with the opponents and their teaching, which Paul has already in 1 Timothy classified as Satanic/demonic (4:1).

I have dealt with the dilemma of the younger widows *desiring* marriage (v. 11), while being within a group that *forbids* marriage (1 Tim 4:3), by pointing out that vv. 11–15 likely provide us with a glimpse of a key decision. I have suggested that the decision to marry would have been a violation severe enough to warrant exclusion from the opponents’ group. This is supported by the fact that Paul treats the traditional household as a place where the Christian woman will be safe from the opponents (v. 14). Based on this, I have contended that the younger widows are faced with three options, two of which would lead to separation from the opponents, but only one of which, in Paul’s assessment, would please God. First, they can attempt to overcome their desire to marry, remain in good standing with the opponents, and continue to be associated with Satan. Second, they can succumb to their sexual desire, marry unbelievers, and separate from the opponents, while still bringing divine condemnation on themselves. Third, they can marry believers, separate from the opponents, and return to God-pleasing works in the traditional household.

Because these younger widows were working alongside the avaricious opponents in Ephesus, somehow spreading their erroneous eschatology, the faithful Pauline community was in one way or another funding false teaching. Perhaps the church-supported widows were disbursing funds to the ones who had recruited them. Or perhaps they retained their full portion of church funds. In either case, the situation was dire, and in my assessment it is this dire situation that best explains the remarkable amount of attention widows receive in 1 Timothy.

ine author believes that through marriage and childbearing the energy of the widows in Ephesus would be redirected toward managing their homes, and they would not be as susceptible to idleness and engaging in foolish talking, and hence, less likely to fall victims of the false teaching.”