

Back in January I made three posts on the role of women in the churches of Paul (see the posts of January 16, 17, and 18). These raised various questions from readers about how and why women went from having a fairly \*prominent\* role in Paul's own churches to having thoroughly \*diminished\* roles in the churches that arose after his day, as embodied for example in the Pastoral epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus (books that claim to be written by Paul but that he did not himself write; they were produced by a later author who, among other things, opposed the role of women in the church).

I'd like to answer these questions by discussing a matter that most modern readers of the Bible (or of other ancient texts) simply are unaware of: how ancient people understood the relationship of the genders. We ourselves have a "common sense" of what the differences between male and female are, and we naturally assume that our common sense has been the common sense of everyone who ever has lived. It turns out that's not true at all! It's hard to believe, but easily demonstrated, that ancient people understood the relationship of the genders very differently from us. Here is what I say about it in my textbook on the New Testament.

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### ANCIENT IDEOLOGIES OF GENDER

The Pauline churches eventually moved to the position embraced by the Pastoral epistles. They restricted the roles that women could play in the churches, insisted that Christians be married, and made Christian women submit to the dictates of their husbands both at home and in the church. It would be easy to attribute this move simply to male chauvinism, as much alive in antiquity as it is today, but the matter is somewhat more complicated. In particular, we need to consider what male domination might have *meant* in an ancient context; for most people in the ancient Roman world thought about gender relations in terms that are quite foreign to us who live in the modern Western world.

People in our world typically consider males and females to be two different kinds of human beings related to one another like two sides of the same coin. We sometimes refer to "my better half" or to "the other half of the human race." In antiquity, however...

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