

STRUGGLES FOR POWER IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

A Study of the First Letter to Timothy

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Translated from Spanish by Gloria Kinsler

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Originally published as *Luchas de poder en los orígenes de cristianismo* © 2005 by Editorial Sal Terrae, Polígono de Raos, Parcela 14-1, 39600 Maliaño (Cantabria), Spain.

English translation published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308.

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tamez, Elsa.

[*Luchas de poder en los orígenes del Cristianismo*. English]

Struggles for power in early Christianity : a study of the first letter to Timothy / Elsa Tamez ; translated from Spanish by Gloria Kinsler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-708-2 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: (invalid) 1-57075-710-5 (alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T. Timothy, 1st—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BS2745.52.T3613 2007

227'.8306—dc22

2006030804

The Rich and the Struggles for Power in the Christian Community

It is remarkable that at the beginning (2:9ff.) and end of the letter (6:17-19) there are some not very cordial instructions for the wealthy who belong to the Christian community in Ephesus—at the beginning, rich women; at the end, the rich in general, women and men. In addition, in 6:6-10 our attention is powerfully drawn to an even stronger critique of those persons who want to become rich or to the rich who cling to their wealth.¹ The strong and uncomfortable affirmation that “the love of money is the root of all evil” is mentioned here by the author of the letter. If we observe the epistle as a whole, and certain texts carefully, such as 3:1 and 5:17-25, the radical critique cannot be gratuitous. Behind it there is something that provokes this rhetorical speech. It seems to me that there is a problem of power struggles in the community, in which the wealthy, especially rich women, are an essential part. The suspicion that leads us to think in this manner is illuminated not only from the text itself. In our communities or local churches today, we frequently find that well-to-do members will challenge the leaders of the community, by-passing them to impose their own will. Could it be that something similar is what was happening in the community or communities of Ephesus?

In this section we will analyze some texts that will lead us to confirm our suspicions that there were struggles for power in the Christian community to whom this letter was directed, such as the participation of well-to-do persons in these struggles, and above all between rich women and male leaders of the community. At the same time we will situate these texts in their social and economic context in order to reach some conclusions.²

Let us begin with the rich women, because it is one of the most crucial points in the situation of the community.

RICH WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLES FOR POWER

The Text: 1 Timothy 2:8–3:1a

⁸I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; ⁹also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, ¹⁰but with good works as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. ¹¹Let women learn in silence with full submission. ¹²I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. ^{3:1}This saying is sure.

The literary context comes in the middle of the author's instructions begun in chapter 2 with respect to prayer. The instructions are directed first to the whole community:

^{2:1}First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for everyone. . . .

After that come the men (2:8) and finally the women (2:9-15). If we compare the instruction directed to the men with that to the women, we immediately observe a considerable difference between them. The instruction to the men is very brief: to pray serenely with their hands raised, without anger or resentment. That to the women is much longer and very negative: it includes the manner of dressing and how to behave in the Christian community and, implicitly, in the household (2:9-12); besides that, the author adds an interpretation of Scripture (Genesis) that

favors the preeminence of the man (2:13-14) and a theological affirmation to legitimate the command (2:15).

The most authoritarian verse is 2:12, in which the author explicitly rejects the idea of a woman teaching (*didaskein*) and “having authority (*authentēin*) over a man.” He uses the phrase “I do not permit that” (*ouk epitrepō*). When the author gives instructions to the whole community and to the men on their way of praying and to the women on how to dress, he uses two less negative verbs than “I do not permit that.” In 2:1 he writes “I exhort . . .” (*parakalō*) when speaking about prayer for all the community, and in 2:8: “I desire” (*boulomai*) in reference to how men should pray and what should be the clothing of the women³ in the Christian community.⁴ These two terms leave room for the possibility of dialogue. “To exhort” (*parakalō*), for example, is a term that supposes “a command in the context of mutual relationships”⁵; it could even be translated “I recommend.” The verb “to desire” (*boulomai*), although it could be an imperative, is ambiguous and could leave room for dialogue. “I do not permit” (*ouk epitrepō*), however, is surprisingly authoritarian and closes off dialogue. We could say the same thing of the imperative “to learn” in the phrase “Let women learn in silence with full submission” (2:11). In synthesis, the author prohibits women from teaching or having authority or dominion over men. This prohibition, although surely directed to all the women, is related to or rather is motivated or provoked by certain wealthy women who are asked not to be ostentatious in their dress.

In this situation, the question that comes up is: Why does the author react in this way against this feminine sector of the community? Is it only because he dislikes women, or are there other situations that provoke such a negative and angry demand?

The text is very complex, and the distinct aspects that appear must be defined in order better to understand them. Three elements come to our attention: the first is the social condition of the women who are mentioned here. They are rich, as can be deduced from their clothing (2:9-10). The second element is the condition of the feminine gender itself (2:11-12), in which certain behaviors are demanded according to patriarchal domestic codes of the time, such as keeping silent during instruction, not placing oneself over a man, and subordinating oneself to him

(keep silent) (2:12b). The third is the element of maternity with salvific character (2:15), which sends us to the conflict with “other teachings” in 4:3, where we read, “They forbid marriage” Connected to this dispute about marriage also is the case of young widows in 5:14.

So I would have younger widows marry, bear children and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us.

As can be seen, the problem is not simple, because certain diverse issues are woven together that cannot be ignored or reduced to just one issue.

For didactic reasons, in this chapter we will concentrate only on the question of class or social condition of the women mentioned in 2:9-10. We will deal with gender relations (2:13-15) and theological disputes in the following chapters.

Against Expensive Clothing

Reading the letter from our Latin American context, the exhortation on women’s clothing gets our attention right away. Above all, the way in which women should *not* dress or adorn themselves. If the text had stopped at the first part, that is, in 2:9a, the social condition of these women would have gone unnoticed. It would have been seen as a normal exhortation within the pietistic tradition that in the house of God the faithful would dress appropriately and modestly (*aidous*) and with good judgment, simplicity, and decency (*sōphrosynēs*). The author does not stop there, however, but adds a lengthy comment about the opposite of this kind of dress. That is, he does not think it is all right to see in the Christian community women with ostentatious hairstyles (or elaborate braids) adorned with gold and pearls or dressed in expensive clothing. The author uses for “ostentatious hair” the Greek word *plegmata*, which literally means “braids.” In antiquity, a luxurious or ostentatious hairstyle would consist of very elaborate braids, probably sustained with finely woven nets including broaches of gold and precious stones. Such very

sophisticated hairstyles of wealthy women are represented on some ancient reliefs. Pearls, which were much appreciated in the Hellenistic world and in the provinces of Asia, could also refer to earrings, rings, or necklaces.⁶ The author contrasts, then, modesty and simplicity (v. 9a) with ostentation (v. 9b).⁷ Some commentators believe that this form of luxurious and pompous attire points more to women courtesans or prostitutes rather than wealthy aristocratic women,⁸ therefore underlining the question of indecency. But an analysis of the whole letter and its critical vision of the wealthy members of the community supports our reading.

The exhortation to dress in a modest and simple manner, where good works are more important than luxurious attire, cannot be seen simply as a straightforward motif frequent within the moral values of antiquity. Many commentators mention in passing that the advice to dress without ostentation was a common philosophical topic among thinkers and satirists at that time, such as a reference to “the rules of courtesy for decent women.” In fact, the satirists Martial and Juvenal made fun of complicated hairstyles and of the extravagant clothing of society’s aristocratic women. Advice on modest dress for these rich women is found also in ancient writers such as Plutarch, Pliny, Seneca, and Philo, among others.

Nevertheless, we believe that the author does not come up with this topic out of the air, in passing, to counsel all the women of the Christian community on how they should dress. The reference to sophisticated hairstyles, gold, pearls, and expensive clothing, in a community in which the majority of the members are poor, alerts all readers to pay attention to this point because it gives a crucial clue for the reconstruction of the situation. It raises the possibility that the principal problem that the author brings up is not simply about women in general, leaders of the community, but about rich women (as affirmed by various biblical scholars⁹), women who were probably very dominant, as we will see below. At this time, the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century, the tensions caused by the presence of wealthy men and women intensified within the Christian communities.¹⁰ This growing tension between the different social classes in the community was aggravated when some mem-

bers appeared in luxurious clothing alongside those who dressed poorly. For this reason, we insist that the principal critique is ostentation, not indecency.

But the fundamental problem is not the manner of dress but the behavior of those wearing the ostentatious clothing. The most profound tensions probably were produced between church leaders and the wealthy believers of the community rather than between the wealthy and those of scarce resources. The clothing simply serves to point out the social differences and, in passing, to observe the rejection of all ostentation.

We now need to clarify two aspects regarding women and social strata or class in antiquity. In the first place, something that is obvious but often overlooked, when a reading is concentrated primarily on gender, independent from class, is that the oppression of women in the Greco-Roman society in many cases was not equal. Poor women suffered a greater oppression because of their gender and their social condition. Rich women enjoyed many more privileges than poor women and men. Thus, women in the various social strata, from the emperor's house to indigent women of the lowest class, experienced different situations. Although it was not always the case, rich and powerful women could be just as oppressive as men of the same stratum.¹¹

The second aspect to consider is that to speak of rich members of the community does not imply that we are speaking of the truly wealthy of the Roman empire. As can be seen in Appendix I, there was a great distance between the really rich of the aristocracy, who were the large landowners who possessed wealth, power, and status, and the majority of the population, urban as well as farmers, who were poor. Some were above the poverty line, such as administrators for the wealthy, or religious professionals, but because of the distance of their position from the aristocracy, as well as their small number, they cannot be seen as a middle class. As is emphasized today by different analysts of Roman imperial society, in that time there was no middle class as we now conceive it, where a large part of the population is very visible to those who are wealthier and those who are poorer.¹² In any case what is important here is that the rich women, members of the Christian community in Ephesus, are not the truly rich of the Roman empire. It may be that the rich members did

not even form part of the very small number of the Christian sub-decurions (“the little rich” of the provinces who belonged to the city councils and contributed in some way to managing the expenses), but they were in a comfortable position, business administrators of the rich or a trader who had accumulated a certain fortune. Obviously, within the Christian community, their wealth and power became evident as they participated in communities made up mostly of poor persons (not the indigent).¹³ Now that we have made these clarifications, we will go on to analyze the text in terms of the power struggles influenced by these social positions.

An Attack against Wealthy Women

Again, the first question that comes to mind is: Why does the author attack the rich women in the community like this? Because they are women? Because they are rich? Both things could be present, because we know that the critical attitude of this letter is not only against the leadership of women but also against the love of money. The phrase “the root of all evil is the love of money” can be a very hard judgment for those who possess wealth. Nevertheless, in 1 Timothy it is not possible to affirm with clarity the author’s attitude toward wealthy persons. There is ambiguity in the text: although he combats the love of money, in 6:1-2 he exhorts the slaves to give honor to their masters, who are rich. Nor does he exclude the rich from the community, as occurs in the Letter of James (5:1-6), but he exhorts them to give generously (6:17-19).

L. W. Countryman affirms that in that time the communities had an ambiguous vision of wealth: on one side, they had a strong criticism of wealthy men and women, following the Jewish prophetic heritage; but, on the other side, the need of their donations was becoming more and more necessary in order to help the poor, until they could not do without them.¹⁴ In the writings of Tertullian, Clement, and Origen, for example, we find ambiguity toward the rich and wealth. This indetermination is present also in 1 Timothy. We think that the problem that provokes the letter is caused neither by women in general (although, yes, the author’s

reaction to women is very negative) nor by the presence of rich women (and men), but the problem is the power and influence that both these elements together have over the community.

One of the key texts on which our suspicion of the struggles for power is based is 2:12, where we find the prohibition to teach or to dominate the men (*anēr*). Although the Greek word *anēr* can also be translated as “husband,” here, because it appears in the context of the community’s liturgy, it would have to be understood as “male.” It seems as though the problem has been raised by the male leaders of the community. The text, although directed toward the women of the community, focuses on rich women. The prohibition implies that these women are teaching in the church, which was common in the early Christian communities, but for some reason this exhortation demands stopping this practice. That is, the author does not want women to continue teaching. The motives can be linked to the problem of what the author considers to be teachings foreign to the gospel, which supposes that these women find these teachings appealing and are sharing them with other women, as we will see in the third chapter. We think, though, that, above all, the prohibition of 2:12 is the result of the strong influence of these rich and powerful women over the whole community. The issue was that some women were well off, and, because of the patronage system (to which we will refer to below) were socially above the men. The “honor” of these women according to the parameters of Greco-Roman society was above both men and women of lesser means. The affirmation not to dominate or exercise authority is highly significant in this context. It does not refer to husbands, as we said above, but to men in general. By the tensions referred to in the text, we believe that the author has in mind particularly the male leaders of the community, elected by the assembly, with the imposition of hands by the elders (5:17-22).¹⁵ The Greek verb *authentēin* means “to control, to dominate, to compel, to influence in something, to act independently, to assume authority over, to usurp, etc.”¹⁶

We find ourselves, then, with a struggle for power between the rich women who teach without being officially named and the male leadership. The author of the letter sends instructions to remove the rich women from leadership positions; but by

writing the letter and speaking in generic terms, he unfortunately penalizes all women of all social conditions.

How is it possible that the rich women have achieved power within the community? For us in Latin America today, the answer is easy: it is an everyday occurrence in our Christian communities. Wealth and power easily open doors in all circles, not just in the secular world. People very often remain silent when favors (preferences, permissions, places, goods, etc.) are received by the rich on different occasions without much effort, just because of their social position. Many people even pay them tribute. The ancient world was not very different. The Letter of James criticizes the servile attitude when the brothers and sisters of the Christian community reserve the best places for the splendidly dressed rich who come to the assembly, while the poor dressed in rags are left behind and given the worst place (Jas. 2:1-4).

One explanation for the powerful influence of wealthy men and women in the early Christian communities is what is called the patronage system, which tied the relationships of those who had less with those who had more. This system is key for understanding the preeminence of certain women and certain men in this Ephesian community. Let us look at what it means.

The System of Patronage

The system of patronage, also called a system of benefactors, consisted of an exchange of relationships between those of unequal means. When a rich and powerful person gave a favor and protection to another person of an inferior status, a permanent relationship was established between patron and client. The patron gave what the other needed, and the one who received had to compensate in some way for the favor received. Generally, people repaid the favor, rewarding the persons who did the favor by praising their generosity, paying tribute to their honor or services and being loyal forever. Because honor was one of the fundamental values at that time, patrons needed praise in order to conserve their status and power in society. There was also a system of relationships between equals to do mutual favors; these were called friendship relations and did not fall into patron-client relationships.

Patronage was not limited to relations between people; it also took place between the rich and a city. For example, the rich made public donations to their city in the form of buildings, monuments, and food for the poor, as we will see below. Of course, the benefactors always wanted to be recognized and given the honor that their favors merited.

The patronage system was one of the essential pillars of the Roman social system. The cities, in order to support themselves and advance in the construction of theaters, baths, and monuments and to avoid discontent among the unemployed and the poor, needed patrons or benefactors who would also offer food and celebrations. Richard Horsley has come to the conclusion that, thanks to the patronage system, there were few internal rebellions against the Roman imperial government.¹⁷

The patronage system was present at all levels of Roman society, from the highest to the very lowest. The emperor, called Benefactor or Protector, centralized his power and controlled the senators and equestrians (two orders of the aristocracy) through the patronage system, offering favors to the wealthy of the aristocracy. These clients had to respond with loyalty so that the emperor's power was exercised through them. Likewise, the generals and governors sent by the emperor became patrons, and the local authorities, or decurions, became clients, obligated to give honor and loyalty to those sent from Rome.

In turn, the local authorities and local aristocracy of the cities did favors for those of lower rank, establishing the patronage relationship. The rich families of the provinces donated public buildings and subsidized celebrations, games, banquets, and the like, for which they were rewarded. Inscriptions in their honor, statues, letters of gratitude, effusive praise, votes for election as member of council, and so on show the obligatory response of those who benefited from the favor, such as associations,¹⁸ rulers of the city, and the poor people in general, who sometimes also received food. The actions of these benefactors or patrons were called *emergesiai*, that is, good works.

This patronage system was present in all areas of life: in politics, business, and personal relationships. Even a philosopher or a writer might be obligated to become a client to a rich patron in order to survive. It would be almost impossible to have a

rebellion against the imperial power because everyone except the indigent was compromised in some way as a client to a patron of superior rank. The patronage system was very effective for social control and constituted a strategy of social cohesion.¹⁹

Favors could be of any kind: intercession in a legal case; a recommendation in the political sphere; a loan for the gathering of the harvest, to buy land, or anything else; the concession of Roman citizenship, and so on. Patronage was present in personal and public relations. It was also present in the associations. One or more rich members would offer a sum of money for the maintenance of the association or would give banquets or other benefits. The members would then respond with banquets in his honor, or the honor of his family, or with inscriptions, statues, or votes to support his election to the board of directors.

Wealthy women also participated in this patronage system. They could be patrons of associations, of persons, and also of cities by giving donations to public works, such as baths, temples, or other buildings.

It is logical to suppose that the influence of this system, so common and familiar in all the Roman empire, was very strong in the Christian communities. For example, a man or woman head of a wealthy family who would offer his/her house to the community would be considered a patron and very probably expected to be recompensed in some way by the other members. And because the patronage system was contrary to the gospel's principles of equality, conflicts with rich men and women would not have been surprising. This situation can be seen in 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

THE WEALTHY SHOULD NOT EXPECT TO BE REWARDED FOR THEIR FAVORS

The Text: 1 Timothy 6:17-19

In 6:17-19 the author sends certain instructions for the wealthy members of the Christian community. Again, we insist that the instructions do not describe the way the wealthy are living but most likely the contrary. The instructions aim to correct or to show a desire for new conduct.

Let us look at the recommendations and their implications:

¹⁷ As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹ thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so they may take hold of the life that really is life.

The instructions are directed to the rich (*plousiois*), masculine plural, but this implicitly includes rich women, who were mentioned in 2:9. The expression “rich in the present age” refers to those who already have material goods in their Greco-Roman society. These, to be able to fit into the Christian community of Ephesus, must be distinct from those wealthy who follow the values of the imperial Roman society, that is, those customs that belong to the patronage system. The benefactors or patrons did good works in the cities or did favors to others, always expecting to be rewarded with honor or recognition as reciprocal payment for the favor or gift given. All this was done to consolidate their status and power. If they gave magnanimously, they did so to get more honor and recognition. In his work *Moralia*, Plutarch (ca. 50-120 C.E.) reproaches this attitude and affirms that this extravagance of the rich was a mask that really hid their love for money.²⁰ According to Reggie McReynolds Kidd, the author of 1 Timothy has in mind the behavior of the wealthy in the Christian community when he writes this exhortation. In a certain sense, the instructions to the rich believers are a criticism of the haughty and self-interested behavior of the rich in general, lovers of fame, money, and power.

The author proposes seven recommendations for the rich. In the first (v. 17a), he rejects arrogance or haughtiness. This is a characteristic of those who possess wealth and look down on everyone else. This is the first recommendation because the Christian community was made up of different social strata, with the majority living in poverty. Christians had inherited the values of humility and simplicity from the tradition of Jesus, so that

there should not be members who believed they were superior to the rest. The second recommendation (v. 17b) is connected to the third (v. 18a), which has to do with hope placed in wealth and not in God. For the author, riches are uncertain, so to put hope in them is nonsense (see Luke 12:13-21). Our hope must be placed in God, because, unlike money, God does not defraud. This text is like a strong echo of Luke 16:13, which demands a decision between God and money (*mammon*). It must be recognized that God is the giver of all, and one must enjoy those gifts with rejoicing, not accumulate them with greed or squander them with the intention of raising oneself to a higher status or more recognition, because this is also “love of money,” as Plutarch thought. The love of money, as has already been said by the author in 6:10, is the root of all evil.

The four following recommendations have to do with the sharing of solidarity: To do good (*agathoergein*) to others, to be rich in good works (*ploutein*), to be generous (*eumetadotous*) and to be in solidarity (*koinōnikous*). The emphasis on sharing and giving is obvious. This would be, for the author, the principal role of the rich; their task in the community is none other than to support the community economically. The author is probably referring to the solidarity of the rich with their poor brothers and sisters of the community, such as the abandoned widows (5:3 and 16b), which was the most important task of solidarity of the early church.

What is interesting in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 is the relationship of the rich to the patronage system.²¹ Wealthy women and men will have their reward from God. To share with others is a good investment to be able to reach true life. In other words, the author, in a reasonable way, is saying to the rich that they are not to expect, because of their gifts and good works in the community, the submission of the members or the leaders. They should not expect to be given honor, recognition, or praise, as they were accustomed to receive in the meritocratic Greco-Roman society. They will receive their recompense from God, a reward that leads to true life, life that is authentic, integral, and in solidarity. Thus, if the rich women and the well-to-do-men expected to assume prominent positions in the community simply because of their donations, the author forbids that. If someone wants to be an

overseer, even though it would be a “noble task,” that person must comply with certain requirements.²²

The fact that the rich expected to be rewarded in some way by the Christian community could come from the existing custom in the so-called voluntary associations or clubs. We place the text in the context of the associations.

Associations and the Christian Community in 1 Timothy

In the Greco-Roman cities there existed the custom of forming groups based on common interest and meeting periodically.²³ The Romans used the Latin term *collegia* to refer to them. They were associations or brotherhoods; some were small, with about twelve members, and some grew to thirty. Very seldom would an association have more than forty members. In these associations, or clubs as some also call them, people in the city found a certain sense of belonging. They would meet to celebrate suppers or banquets, according to the social position of the association; to worship some god, offering sacrifices; to discuss some theme of common interest; to celebrate the funeral of one of their members. There were associations whose members had a common profession or employment, or who venerated a particular god. Besides a leader who directed the group, there was a treasurer to gather the monthly quotas to defray the costs of the association, such as festivals in honor of the patrons or benefactors, banquets, suppers, funerals, and the like. There was also a priest for the religious rituals or sacrifices. An association had its constitution or rules, and it was common for rich members to serve as patrons or benefactors, offering donations of their wealth to the association. They could also offer their houses for the meetings and pay the cost of the supper or banquet, or the animals offered to the gods. As a reward, the patrons or benefactors would receive special treatment; for example, the chief of the club would receive a double portion at the banquets.²⁴

The authorities of the Roman empire felt a certain mistrust toward these associations because they considered them to be possible centers of conspiracies. It was for this reason, as John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch point out, that the Roman

authorities reduced the associations to three types.²⁵ One type was associations formed by the city's poor; these were called *collegia tenuiorum* (artisan associations). The poor members had legal permission to form an association; the main purpose was so that they would have a funeral when they died. Normally, the poor were buried in a common grave, lacking resources for a dignified ceremony. Therefore, the associations of this category fulfilled the primary function of offering a funeral and accompanying the dead in a procession to one of the tombs placed outside the city. The tomb was acquired by the association with a small monthly quota given by its members. The members also had to give an inscription fee to participate in the association. Another advantage of belonging to the association was attending the meetings, where members would eat together once a month and strengthen the bonds of friendship.

Another type of association was the *collegia sodalitia*, which had a religious function. These associations met to worship a particular god. The majority of these groups were formed by foreigners who wished to continue worshipping the god or gods of their ancestors.

The third type, the most prominent, was created for owners of certain types of businesses (shipping, transport, bakeries, carpentry, etc.). The majority of these types of *collegia*, above all the owners of ships, had sufficient money to offer the city monuments, buildings, or other economic services. As was true in all associations, the members established the criteria for membership and set the number of members. They also chose a god to whom to offer sacrifices.

The Jewish communities that met in synagogues and the Christians who met in houses were often confused with the *collegia sodalitia*, which were religious. The wealthy Gentile men and women were probably members of one of the professional associations and probably expected to be treated as patrons or benefactors in the Christian communities. These communities, heirs of the Jewish prophetic tradition, did not have this custom; in fact they said "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," making it understood that solidarity with the poor is done in secret and from the heart and not to receive admiration and honor.

In sum, we believe, with Kidd, that this instruction from the author is criticizing the patronage system, which legitimated and consolidated social stratification and the subjugation of some by others. It is possible that the wealthy of that community thought it was normal that they would assume leadership without being responsible to anyone. In any case they were probably paying the expenses of the community. The elected leaders, with fewer resources but legitimately named, were possibly ignored by the rich. It is not by chance that the author encourages Timothy, the official carrier of the letter, saying, “Let no one despise your youth” (4:2). Moreover, the author exhorts Timothy not to accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three (5:19), to do nothing on the basis of partiality or favoritism, not to hastily lay hands on anyone for leadership in the community without meditation (5:21-22), and to be sure that the elders who teach and preach well are paid double²⁶ (5:17). The texts make it clear that there are struggles for power within the community between the wealthy and the elders and other leaders named by the laying on of hands. It seems as if the wealthy are putting pressure on the young Timothy, because they think that since they are benefactors they have rights over the community and its leaders. That may be why the author of the letter three times encourages Timothy, who has no wealth or power so as to be treated as an equal by the rich of the community, to value his rights as a legitimate leader named through the laying on of hands (1:18; 4:14; 6:12).

But this does not finish the author’s criticism of the rich. Let us look now at a text that joins these passages with “other teachings” and the idea of believing that godliness is a means of gain.

GODLINESS IS NOT A MEANS OF GAIN

The Text: 1 Timothy 6:3-10

The text (6:17-19) that we have just analyzed about the rich has been seen as out of context because of the apparent thematic contrast with the preceding verses (6:11-16), which contain wise advice for Timothy and conclude with a doxology.²⁷ Neverthe-

less, we believe that 6:17-20 forms an integral and coherent part of the chapter.²⁸ We now think, as do Countryman and Kidd, that the principal opponents are, in fact, the patrons of the community, especially the rich women who at the same time teach or associate with and support teachers who promote ideas contrary to those of the author of 1 Timothy. Thus, 6:17-19 is like a conclusion to the problem of wealth that began in 6:3-10 with an attack against those who love money. The following verses, 6:11-14, counsel Timothy to act in a radically different manner from those who love money and see godliness as a financial investment. The doxology of vv. 15-16 emphasizes that honor and power belong to God alone, the only sovereign.

For the author, the rich, who believe themselves experts in teaching and want to impose that teaching on the community, are not teaching with godliness. Even worse, they believe that godliness is a means to gain, in the sense of status, honor, and power. Let us look at the text:

^{6:3} Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accord with godliness, ⁴ is conceited, understanding nothing, and has morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words. From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, ⁵ and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. ⁶ Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸ but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹ But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

This passage is very intriguing; it mixes love of money, godliness, and other teachings. The composition is interesting because it seems as if vv. 3, 5b-6, and 10 form a circle in which the three

themes are united. Verse 3 alludes to certain persons who teach a message different from “the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness.” Verse 5b affirms that these people believe that “godliness is a means of gain.” And v. 10 repeats the saying that the root of all evil is the love of money, and it warns those who vehemently (*oregomenoï*) covet or desire riches that they will not only wander away from the faith but cause pain to themselves.

Verses 3 and 10 are united explicitly by the theme of “other teachings” (v. 3) and straying from the faith (v. 10). The diversion from the faith would mean distancing from the sayings or teachings (*logoi*)²⁹ of Jesus and moving closer to another kind of teaching (v. 3). We know that in the Gospels there is a radical critique of those who love wealth; the Gospels even demand deciding between God and wealth (Matt. 6:24). Wealth was considered an idol if all hope is put there. The saying “The root of all evil is the love of money” was a well-known maxim at that time. Bion, for example, said that “the love of money was the city-mother of all evil.”³⁰ The thoughts about wealth in antiquity were not the same as today; accumulation was seen as wrong, the same as usury and greed. The wealthy should give a good part of their money to benefit the city, in the distribution of food for the population or in entertainment when it was necessary. The rich who were stingy or in love with money were criticized by the philosophers of that time. Today, everything is geared to the maximization of profits; everything is calculated to facilitate our own enrichment, without thought for the future well-being of the poor. It was not like this in antiquity; the Gospels criticize the attitude of love of money, as did the Greco-Roman writers. The difference between the two is that the Gospel invites us to love God and to be in solidarity with our neighbor freely, and the Greco-Roman values promote the love of honor, status, and power as a reward for those who give generously. It is because of this that the author of 1 Timothy exhorts the rich (6:18) to give generously, and their reward will be life that is really life, since now and forever power and honor are for God alone (6:16). Let us look in detail at the relation between these verses, and we will be surprised that these are not just a simple series of warnings or sayings without coherence, as some think.

Money, Godliness, and Other Teachings

1 Timothy 6:3 affirms that the words or sayings of Jesus are sound and are in accord with godliness (*eusebeia*), the way to be Christian. This is contrasted with v. 10, in which love of money is not only different from the teaching of Jesus, but is a sickness that separates us from sincere faith and causes much suffering. Those who desire and love money cannot act with godliness; that is to say, they cannot manifest coherent behavior as followers of Jesus Christ.

Verses 5-8, which form the center of the passage, perfectly join with vv. 3 and 10. Those who “teach otherwise” than the words of Jesus Christ and godliness (v. 3), according to the author, have a corrupted mind and are deprived of the truth; they think that godliness means gain, a way to make money, a source of economic gain (*porismon*) (v. 5). The relation with v. 3 lies in that they are deprived of, or have denied themselves (*apesterēmenon*), the truth of the Gospel (2:5). They are the ones who are teaching something different from the words of Jesus and the teachings of godliness. The author is clear that godliness is only advantageous (v. 6) if we live according to the words of Jesus, that is, with actions and attitudes of contentment (*autarkeias*) with what we have, in the sense of not having an eagerness for more money and profit. There is no need to accumulate money and goods when we have that which is necessary, such as food and clothing (v. 8). It is useless to accumulate, for we brought nothing into the world and have no needs after we die (v. 8). Those who live according to the “truth of the Gospel” will have a more fulfilling life than those living with an accumulation of economic goods. The relation of vv. 5-8 with v. 10 is climactic: the root of all evil is the love of money, and for that reason it is a true heresy to make godliness a transaction. It is against the words of Jesus and true godliness.

We have seen a harmonious circle in which the most important points are 6:3, 5-8, and 10. Now we need to examine the intermediate verses, 4 and 9. Verse 4 speaks negatively of those persons who teach something different from the words of Jesus and describes the damaging consequences of that behavior. Verse 9 describes the damaging consequences for those who want to

be rich. If we relate those two texts, we find that, for the author, those who teach something different from the words of Jesus Christ are those who want to be rich or to keep their wealth (*ploutein*).³¹ These, according to v. 4, are vain, understanding nothing, having a morbid craving for controversy and useless disputes. For the author of the letter, this is harmful, a sickness that produces envy, discord, slander, and base suspicions. Their minds have been corrupted and have gone so far from the truth of the Gospel that they believe that godliness or Christian piety is a transaction. But the author speaks about the consequences the rich will suffer for keeping their wealth. According to human experience, those persons fall into temptation, greedy and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction (v. 9). That is why the author reminds them that the love of money is the source of all evil. How is it possible to believe that godliness is a source for making money? This is the great heresy for the author.

Let us look at the concentric structure of this passage:

- A Some are teaching something different from the sound words of Jesus Christ and godliness (v. 3).
- B Those who are vain, understanding nothing, dedicate themselves to useless discussions, leading to envy, dissension, slander, discord, and base suspicions (v. 4).
- C They have left the truth and believe that godliness is gain (v. 5).
- C' Godliness is great gain if one lives with contentment with that which one has (vv. 6-8).
- B' Those who want to be rich or hang onto their wealth are trapped in dangerous desires and fall into ruin and destruction (v. 9).
- A' The root of all evil is the love of money; those who covet it or let themselves be attracted by it wander away from the faith and cause themselves much pain (v. 10).

Verses 6-8 merit a clarification. These texts stand out because of being used in telling people that they should be happy with what

they have, that is, be satisfied with the basic necessities such as food and clothing. We know that these texts have been taken out of context to discourage or combat peoples' popular struggles for better salaries, housing, education, and other things that are necessary for a dignified life. This is a manipulation of the text. When we read these verses, we have to understand that when the author says that there is great gain in godliness combined with "contentment," he uses the Greek word *autarkeias*, which literally means "self-sufficiency." What is fundamental here is that the author puts *autarkeias* in opposition to the love of money and the desire to accumulate wealth, because these lead to ruin and unhappiness. He recommends as more beneficial being content with what one possesses, having the basic needs covered, rather than being eager to accumulate goods. The same critique and counsel appear in Ecclesiastes 5:12-14 and also in Proverbs 30:8. Therefore, this text cannot be taken out of context to discourage the aspirations of the poor to have a wage that will support with dignity their life and that of their family.

To summarize, in 6:3-10 we find that in the community to which this letter is directed some wealthy people, or persons who want to become wealthy, teach something other than the sound words of Jesus Christ. They do not act with godliness: on the contrary, they are vain and have left the truth of the Gospel, supposing that godliness is a transaction, and are eager to accumulate more than what is necessary for self-sufficiency, which leads to ruin and destruction. They have forgotten that the root of all evil is the love of money and run the risk of not only straying away from the faith but causing much suffering to themselves.

These could be the rich members of the Christian community, whom Timothy should exhort not to puff up with pride, but to share generously without rewards, such as glory or power on the earth (6:17-19). Or they could be persons who are not rich but want to become rich. This is a possibility; we noted that the present infinitive of the Greek *ploutein* ("to enrich oneself," "to be rich") allows that (see n. 31). The Letter of James makes a distinction between the rich landowners (Jas. 5:1-6) and persons who plot to do business so they can make money. In this case, the author of 1 Timothy would attack those who want to become rich more than those who are already rich. Because of

the context, however, we are inclined to agree with Kidd that it deals with the persons who are already rich and remain tied to their wealth.³²

The author recommends to Timothy that he flee from these practices and attitudes and look for other values, such as justice, godliness, faith, and love. He encourages Timothy to be strong against this group of people who teach something else and want to impose it because of their status and wealth. For the author, Timothy must resist and remain faithful as did Jesus before Pilate (6:11-15). This last phrase is surprising. He uses the figure of Jesus when confronted with the power of Pontius Pilate before being condemned to be crucified. Pilate was a Roman procurator of the equestrian order, which was in charge of the occupation forces that had total control over the Judean province. This example indicates that the situation was very difficult for Timothy to have to confront the power of the benefactors or patrons.

The Wealthy, Godliness, and Struggles for Power

Now let us ask ourselves about the relationship of these texts to the struggles for power in the community that we have referred to in this chapter. At first impression, it seems as if there is not much relation; however, when we consider “other teachings” with “the wealthy” we indirectly find the idea of struggle in relation to leadership. Key terms are “other teaching,” “godliness” (piety), and “love of money.” We considered these words together above and observed that, for the author, those who love money are the same ones who teach otherwise. If they have been criticized for teaching otherwise, it means that they are already doing it, or are struggling to do so. According to the author, they are conceited or have become extremely arrogant (*tetyphōtai*), and he tries to disqualify them by saying that they understand nothing and like to pass their time in arguing over the meaning of words (*logomachias*), becoming involved in a useless war of words. Although we have to distinguish between the rhetorical discourse of the author and reality, there is no doubt that there is in these opponents a sense of superiority over the rest of the community, including the leaders. This sense of supe-

riority is because they are the benefactors or patrons who economically support the community and have sufficient time to dedicate themselves to lucubrate their arguments on genealogies and myths. According to the author, their behavior does not correspond to godliness or the modest and simple religiosity inherited from Jesus and Paul. Their godliness is something else, and worse, it is related to gain. But what does godliness (*eusebeia*) mean in 1 Timothy?

1 Timothy has a preference for this term, differing from the other writers of the New Testament. Some think that 1 Timothy uses the term “godliness” (*eusebeia*) in the same sense that it was used outside the circle of Christians. “Godliness” was a term frequently used in the time in which the epistle was written. For the Romans “it meant to scrupulously respect the common tradition, be it a religious law, an order coming from religious authorities or simply a tradition conserved by the pontiffs.”³³ It generally dealt with laws and orders that had to be respected, such as cultic rituals. The ungodly would then be “those that violate ritual prescriptions.” In this way ungodliness and unclean correspond, as do godliness and purity.³⁴

Reading the letter carefully, however, it seems that the sense of godliness in 1 Timothy is different. The influence of the Hebrew Bible is obvious. For the author, *eusebeia* is more than the respectful practice of cultic traditions; it is the way to live the Christian life, in which the commitment to God is reflected in the practice of everyday life. The difficulty will lie in the understanding that one has of the practice of daily life before God and the cultural values assumed in the patriarchal household. We will see this in the second chapter, but we won’t go ahead now: we will continue analyzing the term “godliness” (*eusebeia*). The word unites the fear of God with the knowledge of God and with the concrete and visible practice that this knowledge must reveal. An unjust practice, for example, reveals a false knowledge of God and a lack of the fear of God. For this reason, the author can speak against other teachings that differ from the words of Jesus, whose words conform to godliness (6:3). Thus, when some think that godliness is a means of gain, they do not reveal real knowledge of God nor do they fear God. “They are conceited . . .” says the author of 1 Timothy.

Now we will try to respond to a more difficult question: Why do the rich or those who want to become rich believe that godliness is a source of gain?

Some think that this has to do with persons who charged for their teachings (for the author, false teachings). If that were the case, these persons would not be rich but would have the ambition to be rich, and for them it would be easy to please the rich who paid for the teachings. In this case it would deal above all with the rich women, because they would be more interested in teachings that reject marriage (4:3). The author would then criticize this attitude in those who wanted to become rich, as well as those who were rich. This proposal is consistent with the text. It would also shed light on the issue of double remuneration to the elders especially because they preach and teach (for the author) correct teachings. Here the struggle is between those who teach “other teachings” (“different from the sound teachings of Jesus”) and charge for it, and the elders who should be paid double for their eagerness for good preaching and teaching. In any case, those who want to enrich themselves as well as those who are already rich and lovers of money should not form part of the leadership as either *episkopoi* or deacons, according to the qualities demanded in 3:3 and 3:8. They must be disinterested in money and enemies of illicit gain.

Now then, if we believe that the persons mentioned in 6:3-10 are the rich, we will have to look for another answer to this difficult question. The rich, for the author, have a false godliness; but why do they think that godliness is a means of gain? We do not find a satisfactory solution to this question. One of the answers could be that the rich, upon demonstrating godliness—in the religious sense, devoted and generous with their money—believed that they would receive honor and fame, as they would have in the patronage system. This reward from the clients (in this case the other members of the community) would reinforce the status and power of patrons. It could be that these rich persons would have in mind the Roman meaning of “godliness,” which meant scrupulously following the rituals so as to find favor with the gods and honor from the religious authorities and their fellow citizens.

This last manner of understanding godliness as a means of

gain is not foreign to our context of today's Latin America. There are television programs and large churches, driven by the so-called prosperity theology, in which it is demanded that the people make investments through offerings and donations in order to receive more money from God and to prosper economically. For the author of 1 Timothy this conception of godliness is a heresy, in that it does not follow the tradition of Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures.

Going back to the wealthy in the Christian community of Ephesus, if godliness is a means of gain, then those who were rich would try to occupy spaces for leadership to obtain more power and status. We find, then, that there are struggles for power to occupy leadership positions in the Christian community.

As we have been able to observe, the position of the author is not a simple one. On the one hand, his radical attitude to women is disconcerting; on the other hand, we see an attractive position with regard to his critique of those who look for power because of their wealth and prestige. The rejection of controversy and disputes that oppose the simplicity of the words of the Gospel is also suggestive for our popular reading of the Bible. What is difficult to accept is the generalization of the exclusion of women, the assimilation of the values of the patriarchal household at the time of the Roman empire, and the incapacity to enter into dialogue with new ideas. We will take up these difficult issues in the next chapters. Let us look at the text now from the perspective of the patriarchal household and power relations between the genders.