

2000 Hans Sigrist Prize



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My intention upon receiving the Hans Sigrist Prize was to make a contribution to the biblical movement in Latin America. In this movement the Bible is read from a liberating perspective through the eyes of those who are excluded. Nevertheless, very little has been done on Biblical texts that are not liberating. I chose the First Letter to Timothy which openly excludes women from leadership in the church and reminds the slaves of their status as slaves. My objective was to understand the why of these affirmations by the author, especially against women, in order to dissent canonically. To dissent against these Biblical texts can be profoundly liberating.

To find keys for this reading it was necessary to go «behind the text», «through the text», that is to say to try and do an historical reconstruction of a possible situation of the primitive communities that would provoke the author's discourse. The study of the text became very complex be-

cause of the mixing of the conflicts related with social status, gender and divergent theological postures. All of this within a society hostile to Christians.

An interesting perspective that could explain a part of the letter was the power struggles between the wealthy women (benefactors) and the deacons, provoked by patronage relationships, very common in antiquity. Nevertheless, the problem of gender is very present because the attack against the wealthy women is not only because of being rich but also because of being women. The author does not hide his strong patriarchal position. The domestic codes (Haustafeln) highly held by governments and masculine thinkers of the Greco-Roman society, appear scattered in the text. They are to be applied rigorously not only in the private household but also within the church (ekklesia) (3:4-5; 3:14-15). In 1 Tim. 5:3-16 the author wants to regulate the economic question of the

church's solidarity with the poor widows, and also to regulate the list in which the widows, who possibly had a certain official leadership role in the church, are inscribed. He excludes the young widows from the list (poor and rich) because he sees them as a danger that undermines the patriarchal household. The «other teachings», against which the author pronounces, «prohibit matrimony» (4:3). This could have been attractive to those women who did not want to submit themselves to the patriarchal household. For the author this attitude of not wanting to submit to the patriarchal household could be dangerous for the church in a hostile society.

As can be seen, the complexity of the text is evident. It is not possible to analyze one point without making reference to others. The negative effects of the text for today's readers demand that this letter not be read in a fundamentalist manner.

Having received the Hans Sigrist Prize allowed me to dedicate full time to investigate a theme that otherwise would have been very difficult to do because of commitments with the institution where I work. With these funds, I decided to ask for a leave of absence without salary to work on the chosen Biblical text (1 Timothy), to visit libraries and book stores in

other parts of the world (here in Costa Rica the libraries are extremely poor in the areas of Bible and theology) and to do popular and academic workshops as I advanced in my investigation. I value the significance of my work not only at the personal level but also at the level of its contribution to the Biblical movement. I have tackled an important theme which has scarcely been dealt with in Latin American Biblical research. Furthermore, there is almost nothing written in Spanish on 1 Timothy. In this way, I believe that the contribution has been in two directions: in the theme itself and in the Spanish language and readership.

A book has now been published that summarizes the investigation in Spanish that is easily accessible: *Las luchas de poder en los orígenes del cristianismo: un estudio de la Primera Carta a Timoteo*, (San Jose: DEI, 2004). [tr. *Power Struggles in the Beginnings of Christianity: a Study of the First Letter to Timothy*] The enthusiastic reception of this work has led me to begin to investigate what will be a second volume: *La historia de los efectos de 1 Timoteo*. [tr. *The History of the Effects of 1 Timothy*] I thank the Hans Sigrist Foundation and the Faculty of Theology of the University of Bern for this honor.

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