

Marriage and Food in 1 Timothy 4:1-5

By Ekkehardt Mueller

Paul's rejection of extreme positions regarding marriage and food in 1 Tim 4:1-5 have frequently been misunderstood. It seems that some people are quite easily deceived and may fall for various heresies, oftentimes choosing one extreme or the other. In NT times and subsequent centuries some followed quite a licentious lifestyle, while others embraced asceticism.¹ The latter problem is found in this passage:

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, *men* who forbid marriage *and* *advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer. (1Tim 4:1-5, NASB)

It will be helpful to understand the historical context of this passage before looking more closely at each of its constituent parts.

I. The Context of 1 Timothy 4:1-5

Paul's letter to Timothy was written to help the younger colleague pastoring the church in Ephesus (Eph 1:3) and to deal with the problems and challenges that arose there. An issue with false teachers occurs already in chapter one.² False teachers are found again here. In chapter 6:20-21 they are mentioned once more in connection with what was falsely being called knowledge (*gnōsis*).

Just before addressing this heresy head-on, Paul makes wonderful statements about the church and about Jesus to conclude his discussion of church order and organization (1 Tim 3:15-16).³ But although the church is the house of God and the pillar of faith, heresy lurks around the corner and has to be addressed.

II. A Closer Look at the Passage

Verse 1. Clearly, the Spirit referred to in v. 1 is the Holy Spirit. R. F. Collins calls Him "the prophetic Spirit"⁴ and L. T. Johnson "the Spirit of prophecy."⁵ In Revelation 2-3 the sayings of Jesus are at the same time also what the Spirit says. And indeed Jesus had spoken about false christs and false prophets (Mark 13:22).

Already in the time of Paul apostasy began. It would become more pronounced in the following centuries and reach its climax prior to Jesus' second coming.⁶ The deceitful teachings go back to evil spirits, that is, demonic influences which are in opposition to the sound doctrine of the Pastoral Letters.⁷

Verse 2. Evil spirits use human instrumentalities—whom Paul charges with hypocrisy, calling them liars. Their cauterized conscience has become either completely insensitive and no longer reliable as an inner guide to distinguish right from wrong⁸ or it has been branded by an iron to become the property of Satan.⁹

Verse 3a. With v. 3 the nature of this false teaching is described: it forbids marriage and prohibits eating certain food items. We are dealing with a form of asceticism. In Gnosticism, which manifested itself more fully some decades later, a strong distinction between spirit and matter was made. All matter, including the body, was created by the God of the Old Testament, also called Demiurge, and considered evil. This "God" supposedly differed dramatically from the God of love of the New Testament. Gnostics argued that the body is our enemy and must be repressed by asceticism or conquered by fully indulging its desires.¹⁰ In a way not unlike the ascetic Gnostics, the false teachers of 1 Timothy 4 considered marriage with its sexual activity as well as eating certain foods sinful.

Paul had discussed singleness and marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Although he favored singleness “in view of the present distress” (1 Cor 7:26) because “one could give more time and energy directly to serving the Lord (1 Cor 7:32, 35),”¹¹ Paul was by no means opposed to marriage and realized that many were gifted to marry. “But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband” (1 Cor 7:2, cf. vv. 9, 36-38). Paul also encouraged couples to have sexual relations (1 Cor 7:3-5). In the very same letter in which he discusses these ascetic tendencies, Paul supports marriage (1 Tim 2:15; 5:14). “The forbidding of marriage within Pauline Christianity would be to take the position of 1 Cor 7:1 literally, without any of the qualifications offered by the rest of the chapter.”¹² Why did the false teachers forbid marriage? Maybe they considered “marriage as inherently wrong,”¹³ thought that celibate singleness “was the means to a higher degree of holiness”¹⁴ or accepted an “over-realized eschatology” according to which the resurrection had already occurred.¹⁵

The word used for food (*brōma*) means “solid food.” At times it refers to meat or flesh (1 Cor 8:13; Ps 79:2). However it frequently describes grain (Gen 41:35-36; Isa 62:8). Some expositors suggest that Paul is talking about meat. Knight states: “It is likely that *brōma* is used in that specialized sense here. If so, the false teachers are urging abstention from meat as something intrinsically wrong. It is this evaluation of meat as intrinsically evil that distinguishes the false teachers from the ‘weak’ in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and that elicits condemnation and refutation . . .”¹⁶ Others go a step further and suggest that Paul is abolishing the difference between clean and unclean food.¹⁷ Still others are more cautious and do not make a final decision because the term “food” is a general term and nothing in the text indicates that it refers to meat.¹⁸ Therefore, it is also impossible to make a case against biblical food laws. Interestingly enough, Clement of Alexandria states that some people ascribed abstention from sexual relations and the prohibition of eating beans to Pythagoreans (*Stromata* 3.24.1-2).¹⁹ If this is correct, the issue would not necessarily involve eating meat. S. H. Webb even suggests that the issue with the opponents is “strict periods of fasting”:

. . . the Greek word *brōma* is better translated as the generic for food. The group in question probably advocated strict periods of fasting. Even if they were vegetarians, they were being criticized not because of what they would not eat but because they connected their diet to a prohibition of marriage. They were thus motivated by a denial of the goodness of the material world and by a fear of all sexual things.²⁰

Verses 3b-5. Paul counters theologically-motivated asceticism by pointing back to creation. Creation and thanksgiving are important in Paul’s response, and he uses both concepts at least twice. Against this incipient form of Gnosticism Paul’s God is the God of both Testaments, and this God has created everything, even food which is good for consumption and which should be received with gratitude. Johnson points out that verse 4 can be understood prescriptively, namely “nothing is to be rejected,” but also “more descriptively as ‘nothing is rejected’ (that is, by God).”²¹ In any case, God is the giver of good gifts that we are allowed to enjoy. While W. D. Mounce proposes that we are dealing with a cultic context,²² R. F. Collins insists that the writer “does not make use of the ritual language of ‘cleanness’ or ‘purity’ to speak about food. . . . Neither does he use the social language of good nor the medical language of health to speak of diet. . . . Food and sex are good because they have been created by God.”²³

Verse 4 could be understood in an absolute sense, i.e. that Christians can eat anything, but the context of v. 3 seems to militate against such an option. While God created certain things as food for animals and humans, other things were created for other purposes. “Foods that were created for consumption with accompanying thanksgiving are excellent.”²⁴ Although v. 4 may deal primarily with the food issue, it may also, at least indirectly, speak to the prohibition of getting married.²⁵

Since Paul refers back to Genesis 1 and 2, reminding his readers that what God had created was good (cf. Gen 1:31), one has to ask what it was that God created as food for humans. Fiore states: “the appeal to God’s creation and its goodness (v. 4) recalls Genesis 1-2, where food was created and marriage was instituted . . .”²⁶ What was created for consumption were various seed-bearing plants and fruits (Gen 1:29). After the Fall other vegetables were added to humanity’s diet (Gen 3:18). The eating of meat was permitted only after the Flood, but even then it was restricted to clean meat (Gen 9:3; 7:2; 8:20). God did not create animals to be consumed by humans. He created an excellent creation free from death and suffering.²⁷ It is not legitimate to read the situation and the consequences of a post-fall world back into the pre-fall paradise that God had created. But if people prohibit the consumption of what God has created to be used as food and refrain from receiving God’s good gifts with gratitude, they are going against the Creator’s order and plan.

If verse 4 were meant to be all-inclusive we should be able to eat even *poisonous* plants and animals as long as we receive them with thanksgiving. Would they then be miraculously transformed and sanctified and thereby made edible through the Word of God and prayer? Such an understanding resembles magical thinking more than Pauline thought.²⁸ While we should eat and drink to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), we are not told to put God to the test by consuming poisonous things.

Verse 5 has been understood in various ways, especially the phrase “the word of God.”²⁹ It is generally agreed that Paul talks about table prayers.³⁰ W. Hendriksen suggests: “By means of God’s *blessing* upon it [the food] and by means of our *confident prayer*, it has been *consecrated* (cf. 2 Tim 2:21), that is, set apart for holy use, lifted into the spiritual realm. For the Christian, eating and drinking are no secular activities (1 Cor 10:31).”³¹ L. T. Johnson correctly points out that it is not “the prayer that makes marriage or food good; it is such, Paul says, by God’s creation rather than human action.”³²

III. Summary

1 Tim 4:1-5 is a somewhat difficult passage. Although it is quite obvious that Paul is dealing with asceticism, the precise nature of the food is not clear. It is quite likely that he is not talking about meat-based versus vegetarian diets. But even if that were the case, as Lea points out, Paul does not oppose singleness and vegetarianism. It is asceticism that he denounces.³³ The text cannot be used to show that the Old Testament distinction between clean and unclean meats is abolished.

Christians should accept the good gifts that God has provided, namely marital relations and food appropriate for consumption. Eating and drinking are not secular activities. Rather they are to be enjoyed and received with prayers of thanksgiving.

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¹ Cf. George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 187.

² Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin Jr., *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (NAC; Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 127-128 mention that Paul warned against “‘myths’ and legalistic demands of the false teachers in Ephesus.”

³ Cf. Raymond F. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus* (NTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 112.

⁴ Collins, 112.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (AB 35A; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 238.

⁶ Cf. Benjamin Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus* (SP 12; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 90.

⁷ Cf. Collins, 113.

⁸ Johnson, 240: “. . . they have no healthy inner guide.”

⁹ Cf. Knight, 189; Lea and Griffin, 129; Collins, 114.

¹⁰ Cf. William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2004), 147; Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (rev. ed.; TNTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 104. Collins, 114, states: “The two extremes, rigid asceticism and licentious antinomianism with regard to food and sex, were later associated with Gnosticism.” He continues: “The patristic texts and the *Acts of Paul* show that issues of sex and marriage were a matter of heated debate among second-century Christians. The church of the first century was, however, not innocent of debates about food and sex” (116).

¹¹ Knight, 190.

¹² Johnson, 240.

¹³ Knight, 190.

¹⁴ Lea and Griffin, 130.

¹⁵ Fiore, 90.

¹⁶ Knight, 190.

¹⁷ Lea and Griffin, 130, cf. 132, stating that “the believers in Ephesus had learned that there are no food laws.” William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson, 2000), 233, 239, 240.

¹⁸ Cf. Fiore, 90-91; Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 147-148.

¹⁹ Cf. Collins, 116.

²⁰ Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 121.

²¹ Johnson, 241.

²² Mounce, 240.

²³ Collins, 117-118.

²⁴ Hendricksen and Kistemaker, 148.

²⁵ Collins, 119, suggests that the words about receiving food with a prayer of thanksgiving “can readily be extended to the use of sex within marriage.”

²⁶ Fiore, 91.

²⁷ This may not be taken into consideration by expositors such as Mounce, who seems to assume that at creation God already designed the animals to be eaten: “When God looked over creation and pronounced it very good, all foods were declared good. If Towner is correct that the opponents were trying to recreate the Garden of Eden with its lack of (formal) marriage and its vegetarianism, then Paul would be using one of their presumably key passages to argue against their teaching” (241).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 242, emphasizes: “Nothing in the PE [Pastoral Epistles] suggests that Paul sees prayers as having magical powers” (brackets mine).

²⁹ Guthrie, 105-106, Lea and Griffin, 131-132, and Mounce, 241 list several options.

³⁰ Cf. Fiore, 91; Guthrie, 105-106; Lea and Griffin, 132.

³¹ Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 148 (emphasis his). Knight, 192, understands the term “sanctified” in a more general sense as “declared fit, acceptable, or good for use or consumption.”

³² Johnson, 242.

³³ Cf. Lea and Griffin, 132.