



THE EPISTLE OF EUTYCHE

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

It is with greatest pleasure that LF presents the world premiere publication of the recently discovered Epistle of Eutyche, dug from the ruins of the Abbey of Three Marys (mosaic fragments on the site suggest Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Bethany) in southern Croatia. Internal evidence suggests that Theophila was the abbess of the house and received the letter from a fellow abbess by the name of Eutyche in response to an earlier letter from Theophila. Theophila's original letter so far has not been discovered, though its contents is summarized at some length in the present epistle. The text by Eutyche was composed in Latin in an elegant miniscule script. The author was knowledgeable of early church controversies and Greek theology, which suggests familiarity with the Latin translation of John of Damascus's De Fide Orthodoxa. It is also possible, given her location at the crossroads of the Greek and Latin worlds, that Eutyche was herself familiar with the Greek language and theological tradition (note her reference to Basil of Caesarea). Eutyche speaks of married priests; again, it is not clear whether this indicates the Roman practice before the Second Lateran Council (1139) or the common practice of sacerdotal marriage in the eastern church. If Eutyche was educated only in Latin, this would suggest a date for the letter in the mid-twelfth century, but if she knew Greek as well, the date could conceivably reach as far back as circa AD 700 (the first appearance of miniscule writing) and as late as the fall of Constantinople in 1453, at which time the abbey itself was destroyed. Theologically, Eutyche is highly influenced by the Pauline epistles, as the opening of her letter mimics the apostle's style, and throughout the letter references are made to persons mentioned by Paul along with some of his key themes, such as the danger of making a new law out of freedom and the necessity of the strong making concessions for the sake of the weak.

To Theophila, a sister in the Lord, from her kinswoman and fellow believer, Eutyche: Grace, mercy, and peace be with you.

I give thanks to my God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, every time I hear from you. For your epistles over-

flow with the grace of God given us by the Holy Spirit in our baptism. I pray that our redeemer who bought you at great price will continue to work his sanctification in you that you might ever more shine as a reflection of the sun of righteousness, and that all may see your good works and thereby glorify your heavenly Father, and mine.

I am very glad, Theophila, that you wrote to me privately to express your growing concerns in the last year. For it would not do for you to make public your worries, lest you cause one of the weak ones to stumble. I know that you make your inquiries in all eagerness for the gospel to be preached in its truth and purity, yet the spirit of zeal must be checked by the Spirit of holiness. If there is good to be discerned, we must discern it. Even the rugged ore contains purest gold. The dross must be burned away, but not the gold itself. I trust as I reveal to you the matters about which you have inquired, you will come to discern gold in what you previously saw as dross alone.

In short, dear Theophila, you have suggested that the church has done wrongly, even falsely, in entrusting the apostolic ministry to persons of the male sex. You even suggest that from the earliest days of the church, all the way back to the apostles themselves, there was error in doing so. Sister in Christ, I beg with you in the name of our Lord, put these notions far from your mind at once. Be on your guard lest the wicked foe take license from your doubts to pervert the pure gospel that has been handed down for us. For surely you do not suggest that Paul was in error when he preached to the Gentiles; nor Peter when he spoke boldly in the synagogue; nor Philip when he brought the Ethiopian eunuch to faith and baptism. God forbid any pious Christian suggest such a thing!

And yet, in your epistle you already anticipated my response, and I needs must answer you fairly and thoroughly. For, you protest, was it not Peter himself who denied the

necessity of the crucifixion? And did not our Lord rebuke him, nay, exorcise the very devil from him with the words, "Get behind me, Satan"? And who was it that betrayed our Lord into the hands of the chief priests and the scribes, and with a kiss at that, for a paltry sum, but the disciple Judas?

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And did not every one of the twelve desert our forsaken Lord in the end, such that he was abandoned to face his cross alone? On these grounds did not men at once prove themselves unreliable, even unfit, for the office of apostle?

Not content with this evidence, you provided me with still more. For who indeed was it that first confessed Christ to be the resurrection and the life, but Martha of Bethany, who unlike Peter never denied Christ or the necessity of his crucifixion? Who prepared Christ for his day of burial but Mary of Bethany? Here you indicate that this same Mary also forsook the work of women to be a pupil of our Lord and hear his teachings, for which he commended her. Did not the women faithfully accompany our Lord to Golgotha, and wait with him until he gave up his last breath, where the men failed? Was it not to Mary of Magdala that our Lord first revealed himself risen from the dead, a point on which all the gospels are agreed? And was it not she who was first charged with the evangelical message of the resurrection to proclaim to all the disciples: not they to tell her, but she to tell them?

My beloved Theophila, I must confess that when I read these words of yours I was greatly moved. For it has not been my custom, when read-

ing the Scriptures, to note to myself, "Here we have the work of a man," or, "Here we have the work of a woman," for it has long been evident to me that, as the apostle said, "In Christ there is no male nor female." Yet despite this you have drawn to my attention this extraordinary divergence in behavior, and suggest that for these reasons the church has erred in conferring the apostolic office on those of the male sex.

But still, sister, I must rebuke you for this conclusion. For it is evident that our Lord Jesus Christ, rich and abundant in mercy, forgave the disciples who left him; even as upon the cross he said of those who persecuted and executed him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is of the utmost importance that we who strive towards holiness are as abundant in forgiveness as our Lord himself. Yes, Peter failed Christ; but afterwards he faithfully obeyed the charge, "Feed my sheep." It is commonly observed that, in spiritual battles, we women are the stronger sex, as the great bishop of Caesarea said of his own sister Macrina, who far surpassed him in fasting, prayer, and wisdom. But I admonish you that this greater strength not be an occasion for stumbling, for strength itself can become the cause of pride. Because you are nobler, stronger, more faithful and more loyal than Christians of the male sex, will you thereby lord it over them and demean them? No, rather, you will uplift and encourage them that they may perform their duties better.

And yet once again, you anticipated my rejoinder. For you say, it is true that we must allow for weakness while they grow into full strength; but the history of the church demonstrates the great susceptibility of the male sex to heresy. Then you list the dangerous heretics who have wickedly exalted falsehood amongst the faithful. There was Arius, who denied the full divinity of the Son with the Father, and Nestorius, who doubted the unity of the natures. There was Pelagius who supposed that

one might storm heaven with good works, disdain the grace of God as nothing more than a stepping stone. Sabellius supposed that there was one God in three masks, not three persons sharing one divine nature. Eustathius denied the divinity of the Spirit. The list is terribly long and, as you claim, occupied entirely by men.

And yet, my sister in Christ, let us not forget that there have been heretics of the female sex, though they are admittedly few in number. Chief in my mind are Priscilla and Maximilla, who wickedly supported Montanus in his heresy. At the moment I cannot think of any other heretics who were women, but surely there were many. The point is, Theophila, that even one heretic of the female sex is proof enough that we women are not immune to the seductive lure of heresy. And if we are as susceptible as men, there is no grounds for excluding men from service to the Lord. Now in the case of any individual man or woman who succumbs to the temptation of heresy, it behooves the

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church to remove such a person from the apostolic office instantly, so as not to corrupt the faithful and lead them from the narrow way of righteousness unto the gates of damnation. But we must not imagine that it depends upon the person's sex.

But then, my sister, in your epistle you came to a new line of argument which is perhaps more compelling than these based on the examples of our forebears. First of all you state

that there is only one king and one prince of peace. Our Lord Christ also commands that we his followers call no one “father” but his Father alone. For any man to stand in this role is to usurp the singular place occupied by God alone. But I protest that by your reasoning it would be unfitting for any man to occupy a magisterial office either, or to rule as monarch. Ought we dethrone our king because he is not the king of kings? Certainly not; but we must continually exhort him to rule as the king of kings would rule, loving justice and being merciful to the poor, for he stands under judgment for claiming to be king under that greatest of all kings.

You also suggest that the person of the male sex who officiates at the holy mysteries is a source of confusion to the common folk. For the simple faithful, who unlike us are accustomed to believing only what their eyes can see and not what the signs signify, look upon the maleness of the priest and suppose that he is a replication of God our Father in heaven. This is surely an error, for God is neither a man nor a woman, but spirit alone. Or the simple faithful suppose that the priest is a fitting image of Christ our Lord, but they conclude that the fittingness of the image resides in his being a man and not in his spiritual wisdom, ability to instruct and proclaim, steadfastness in faith, and kindness in the shepherding of his flock. But I say to you, the simple faithful will often err, and we cannot eliminate a symbol simply because of its susceptibility to misinterpretation; if we did so, we would stand silent in the churches and depart without any worship taking place at all. Rather we must redouble our efforts to teach the faithful the true meaning of the signs.

Even here you were not content to stop; you had still more arguments to proffer for your position. For you said in your epistle that you have heard the common folk say that God is our Father because He is above us, and sends gifts down upon us, and they suppose in this way that God is more like a man than like a woman, and

so our priests must be men to imitate this action, though many of them are without wives and do not indulge in such activities of the flesh at all. This, I agree, is a repugnant depiction of the most holy and transcendent God. It is in truth a description of Baal, the

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false god of the Canaanites, who was thought to reside in heaven and rain his seed down upon the earth, rather than of the great I AM worshipped by the Hebrews. It is a fleshly image of the God Who is without flesh, comparing His creation of the world and His sinless begetting of His only Son to the sinful procreation which is the lot of men and women upon the earth, and therefore unworthy of Him. We must note that our Lord himself did not take a wife during his time on the earth either, for he did not wish us to suppose that to be divine is to beget like a common animal, as the pagans suppose. I therefore agree with you, sister, that these odious suppositions about our God are unworthy, yet I refer you

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again to my previous rebuttal, to wit that we shall not correct abuse by disposing of the practice altogether, but by reforming it so that it better reflects the light of Christ.

For the same reason I cannot accept your argument that the uncatechized will suppose that we hold something in common with those of ancient time

who worshiped Mithras, the false god of Roman soldiers, since it is claimed by those idolators that Mithras died and rose again, and likewise that those apostates allow only men to officiate at their secret mysteries. It is only to the eyes of the blind that their faith and ours appear to be similar. Shall we disqualify our priests of the male sex sheerly because false religions also have priests of the male sex? It is an absurd suggestion.

Now at last we come to the end of your epistle; I could see by your handwriting that the effort exhausted you. Your stated concern was that many of those holding offices in the church have forgotten those of the female sex who held them, as testified by our Scriptures. They neglect the fact our Lord charged the Magdalene first of all to carry the good news; they overlook the apostle Junia and the deaconess Phoebe; they ignore Priscilla's leadership in teaching and instructing Apollos with her husband Aquila; they discount the prophesying daughters of Philip; they forget it was the piety and example of Eunice and Lois that brought young Timothy to faith; they dismiss the labors of those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, along with Persis and Julia and Chloe. But I say to you: because they have forgotten the evangelical labors of the women, are we to disqualify all the men from theirs? Certainly not. Instead you must exhort them to study the Scriptures afresh, all of which are beneficial to the faithful. You must set the example by praying and prophesying with your head covered so as not to cause offense, for it is certainly true that those who are weaker in the faith take offense easily and make a new law out of our freedom. But you must be steadfast in prayer that these weaker brothers will become spiritually strong like our sisters. For I am confident that, given time, they will come to embrace you and all our sisters in the faith as the disciples embraced the Magdalene with her good news.

The peace of Christ be with you always. ✠