

Can a Wife and/or Mother Work Outside the Home?

“Teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, **keepers at home**, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.” Paul, Titus 2:5, KJV

7 December 2013

Dear _____:

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! I trust that all is well with your family. I want to thank you for holding me accountable to the Word of God during these last weeks. We are accountable to each other, to the church, and ultimately, to the Lord Jesus Christ before whom “each one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12).

In view of our mutual need for accountability, you have personally expressed concern about my wife’s teaching ministry at a Christian school. Your concern needs to be addressed because it challenges my integrity before and submission to the Word of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. At times Paul had to defend himself, and now I feel compelled to assume a similar posture. I have given much thought to the exegesis and theology concerning the issue you have raised, and have come to some relevant and practical conclusions.

Specifically, you question, because of Paul’s counsel in Titus 2:5—that older women are to teach younger women to be “keepers at home” (KJV)—whether my wife has the scriptural right to teach at the school where my children attend because, according to your thinking about and your personal application of the verse in question, she does not exhibit the Christian virtue of being a “worker at home.” Allow me please, to state first my understanding of the truth this scripture communicates, and then its application to our Christian family. In this letter consider with me the exegetical, theological, practical and personal reservations I have with regard to the position you hold.

As perhaps you are aware, a textual problem exists with the word in question as to whether it should read **oikourous** (“keepers at home,” KJV and the Majority Text), or the more difficult reading, **oikourgous** (“workers at home,” NASV and the Amended Text). The difference between the two words is slight and perhaps insignificant to the text’s meaning. As the words have been variously translated, the following random selections indicate the variety: “workers at home” (ASV); “good housekeepers” (Ber); “homekeepers” (Wms); “domesticated” (TCNT); “to keep house” (Beck); “home lover” (Phi); “domestic” (RSV); “good housekeepers” (Modern L); “keepers at home” (KJV); “workers at home” (NASV); and “to be busy at home” (NIV); (See *The New Testament from 26 Translations*, p. 1017.).

Donald Guthrie remarks, “Keepers at home would be a fair translation of **oikourous**, but the better supported reading seems to be **oikourgous** which apparently denotes ‘workers at home’. But the latter is an extremely rare word, and its exact connotation is uncertain.” (*The*

Pastoral Epistles, pp. 193-4)

Assuming the more difficult reading to be the best, **oikourgous** is found only in this New Testament text. Enlightening references to it outside the New Testament are absent. For that reason, many New Testament word dictionaries do not discuss the word or its implications. Neither Kittel's nor Colin Brown's theological dictionaries index the word. This suggests only that caution should be exercised in determining first, the interpretation and then the application of the text in question. Furthermore, no Christian doctrine or practice should be built upon a New Testament *hapax*, a one time occurrence of a word or concept. For example, just because Paul refers to being "baptized for the dead" does not mean that the church should institute such an ordinance as Mormons do. (See 1 Corinthians 15:29.)

Does this mean then that the virtue of **oikourgous** is too obscure to be understood? I think not. It can be noted that the standard *Arndt and Gingrich Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines **oikourgous** as "working at home, domestic," and the verbal root of that word, **oikourgeo**, to mean, "to keep house . . . fulfill one's household duties." (p.561)

One commentary helpfully points out that the adjective "good" (v.3) possibly modifies "workers at home" (v.5, NASV). Vine suggests that the word **agathos** in this context carries a moral sense and "describes that which, being good in its character . . . is beneficial in its effect . . ." (*The Expanded Vines*, p. 493) Thus, when taken together, **agathos** and **oikourgous** should be translated, "fulfill their household duties well." (Dibelius and Conzelman, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 141)

As such, the character quality Paul lauds is only that the godly wife should not neglect her home keeping responsibilities because for her to exhibit such an undomesticated character flaw would invite the world to question the practical testimony and value of her Christian faith. As Warren Wiersbe remarks, "'Keepers at home' does not suggest that her home is a prison where she must be kept! 'Caring for the home' is the idea." (*The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 265)

Ralph Earle writes, "The young women are urged to take care of the home as their first responsibility." (*Word Meanings in the New Testament*, p. 414) J. Vernon McGee notes just previous to a discussion about women in the work force that, "A wife's first responsibility is in her home." (*Thru the Bible*, Vol. 5, p. 489) Did McGee mean to suggest that having fulfilled the "first responsibility," other interests and employment outside the home would be permissible? His discussion in the context seems to give a positive answer. I think you have wrongly understood and quoted McGee to support your position.

Beyond the lexical meaning of the word and a grammatical nuance of the text, the virtue **oikourgous** can be understood against the background of what Paul wrote earlier. The apostle points out that a common character fault of younger widows was that they learned,

To be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busy bodies, talking about things not proper to mention. Therefore I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house and give the enemy no occasion for

reproach.” (1 Timothy 5:13-14)

In addition, it may be that the virtuous wife of the Old Testament is an example against which the meaning of ***oikourgous*** should be understood, for Solomon wrote of her: “She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness.” (Proverbs 31:27)

In this understanding, Homer Kent suggests that ***oikourgous***,

describes the active housewife, whose labors are beyond measure and whose efforts will bless the lives of her children and husband in countless ways. Such a wife is to be distinguished from the busy body whose idleness is a curse to her and all her acquaintances.” (*The Pastoral Epistles*, pp. 229-230)

Similarly, H.D.M. Spence interpreted that, “There should be no desire, no attempt, to go round to other houses, and so contracting idle, gossiping habits.” (*Ellicott’s Commentary on the Bible*, Vol. 8, p. 256)

To my mind and heart, another side of “home working” is defined by its unspiritual contrast. Paul knew that filling up idle time by “coffee klatsching” and going out to lunch with other young wives and mothers in that Cretan church could prove to be “the devil’s workshop.” Therefore, the apostle counsels younger wives and mothers to be busy in their homes so as to shun sloth and avoid gossip. In order to give the world a positive impression of Christianity, ***oikourgous*** simply calls a young Christian wife and mother to blameless industry in the home and away from gadding about.

The immediate injunction of the Apostle Paul concerns the attributes that “aged women” are to communicate by word and lifestyle to “young women.” To be “keepers at home” is an injunction intended to guide younger women. The passage, while containing characteristics that are relevant to all women regardless of their age, may contain elements that are more appropriate to younger women.

Titus 2:5 probes the heart of what it means to be a godly young wife and mother, and in context, Paul lists a group of qualities that define such character. Staying in or working at home, does not prove a woman’s godly character. Given Paul’s emphasis upon the list of spiritual qualities that he desires young wives and mothers to learn and live, the thought that ***oikourgous*** is fulfilled by the semblance and formality of working in a house seems out of sync with the other five inner character virtues.

The characteristics Paul lists partially defines who a godly woman is, not a godly woman’s societal function. To deduce from ***oikourgous*** that a woman reflects godliness because she has no employment or ministry outside the house is not only a legalistic and cosmetic evaluation, but also avoids the real issue: a young wife’s need to cultivate a character that is submissive, loving, industrious, pure and self-controlled.

Paul in this context addresses virtue, not vocation; and a wife's confinement to a house *per se*, does not automatically insulate her from or protect her against the sins of sloth and gossip. We both know Christian women who while they functionally stay at home, reflect little or no spiritual maturity in their lives. It is possible for Christian women to obey the letter of ***oikourgous*** as you understand and apply it, and yet fail to cultivate or manifest any of the spiritual virtues commended by Paul in the context.

Neither does staying at home automatically mean that a woman is a good "help meet" to her husband and a godly mother to her children. She may choose not to pursue ministry or employment outside the house. Her husband may elect that such an outside pursuit is not in the best interests of either their married or family life. If he does, she is obligated to obey her head (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-24; Titus 2:5). Scripture however, does not bind her to that role or place as she attempts to minister to the spiritual, educational and material needs of her family.

Based upon what the Bible says, it's difficult to see that Paul meant a wife or mother was to work only at home. To say that interprets and applies ***oikourgous*** beyond the word's lexical meaning, grammatical understanding, and contextual intent.

In light of the Proverbs 31 passage, which adds to the understanding and application of this text, Jay Adams wrote:

The idea that women should not hold jobs is false. Here is a prominent city elder's wife who does. The key to whether a job is fitting or not lies solely in whether the job helps or hinders her family. (*Christian Living In the Home*, pp. 81-82)

Careerism, and its attendant day-care for children, is wrong and at variance with what it means to be a godly mother, but at the point of a young woman's need "to love" her children (Titus 2:4). Feminism also breaks with what it means to be a godly young wife, but at the point of her need to respect and submit to her husband (Titus 2:5; Ephesians 5:33). Working outside the home neither implies nor suggests that a woman is careerist, feminist, neglectful of her domestic responsibilities, nor disrespectful of her husband.

Incidentally, may I point out that my wife is neither a careerist nor a feminist in teaching at a Christian School? Her track record of being a "Sarah" to me through my seminary experience, a supporting companion, "a help meet," to me during twenty-seven years of marriage and twenty-two years of ministry, and a nurturing mother to our two sons during their formative years, speaks for itself.

Having given attention to the relevance of the general interpretation and application of ***oikourgous*** to a wife's or mother's employment outside the home, allow me to evaluate specifically the appropriateness of my wife's employment at a Christian school, and for the sake of friendly argument, let's assume that your interpretation and application of ***oikourgous*** is correct—that a wife or mother is bound to "work only in the home." How does this relate to the special instance that involves our family—namely, my wife's employment enables our children to

be educated in a Christian school, a school that reinforces the values of our Christian home. Does your understanding of **oikourgos** disallow her to be so employed in our family's case?

Ultimate accountability for a child's education lies with the parent, not the public school, or for that matter, the church. About this Scripture is clear. As Solomon exhorts,

Hear, my son, your father's instruction, And do not forsake your mother's teaching;
Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head, And ornaments about your neck.
(Proverbs 1:8-9; see also Genesis 18:19.)

Some believe that "preserved through the bearing of children" means that while not being allowed to teach men, a woman's teaching ministry is saved through teaching her children (1 Timothy 2:15). Educating a child is both the specific and the broad responsibility of the parents. Thus, given the humanistic and secularist state of public education and the threat it poses to building godly character in children, home or private schooling become appropriate options for Christian parents.

In this vein, Tim LaHaye notes concerning the past role of women in education. He observes that in the 1800's and early 1900's only about 4 percent of the national work force was female. During those years, 80 percent of all school teachers were women comprising most of the female work force of that era. Why was this so? "Because" notes LaHaye, "teaching the young was considered an extension of the home and the rightful duty of women . . ." (*The Battle for the Family*, p. 169)

LaHaye further observes that the pay scale for public school teachers was so low that few male family heads could choose it as a profession and expect to financially support a family. Currently, the salary the Christian school pays my wife is at about at the poverty level. Some things never change! She earns about half of what she would if she were employed by a public school system. So in our decision for her to teach at that salary, nobody can accuse either her or me of greed, or of doing it for materialistic reasons. Our motive is obvious. I have encouraged my wife to sacrificially teach there as a ministry unto the Lord so that our boys will have a tuition free and God-centered education which we otherwise could not afford. In this matter, God knows our hearts and will judge our motives. (1 Corinthians 4:4-5)

In returning to the point however, at the turn of the century our society correctly perceived that a child's education was the domain, extension and prerogative of the home. Therefore, regardless of how you view it, my wife's employment at the Christian school where our boys attend serves as an extension of our family and reinforces its Christian values. Her teaching there pleases the Lord and fits well into any sound biblical theology of the Christian home.

My wife's teaching at a Christian school extends our home to that campus each school day and easily qualifies as a "home working" endeavor. Their mother is there to help supervise, counsel and discipline our boys. To put it another way, when I exempt myself, three-fourths of our family is on the premises of the Christian school during a school day. We are "home schooling" our children in a most appropriate and viable way. My wife is more of a loving mother in this

situation by being with our two sons than if she were to stay at home. She fulfills the counsel of Paul to be a **philoteknos** (“to love their children”) of her children (Titus 2:4). Our boys are not “latch key” kids.

I must also mention Margie’s teaching in public schools during my seminary years. God’s provision of a teaching position for her was a specific and dramatic answer to prayer. Her income allowed me to continue to fulfill God’s calling upon my life after completing my first year of seminary. She willingly sacrificed to that end as did many other wives of fellow seminarians. I must ask that if it was acceptable for her to provide for her husband’s seminary education, why wouldn’t it not now be appropriate for her to work with a view toward properly educating her children?

In thinking about the issue you have raised about her present ministry, I find myself groping with this and other questions. For example, how would **oikourgous** apply to a Christian home when a husband and father might become unemployable due to accident or illness? Would a woman be bound to stay at home and live off the state if there was no adequate insurance or disability income available to the family?

The seminary I attended employed, and presumably still does, employ the wives of both students and some faculty members. Now if “home working” was interpreted and applied as you see it, does that mean that the ministry of that seminary is less than credible and brought into reproach before a watching world because it employs wives, and perhaps in some instances, mothers? Is the seminary involved in some perceived “sin” because it allows the situation to exist? Is the seminary “hypocritical” in that it tolerates working wives in its “sacred halls” while at the same time forbidding such in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (your understanding), a commentary which incidentally, was written by the seminary’s faculty members? What about the numbers of other Christian schools, churches and missionary agencies that employ wives and mothers outside the home? Are all the leaders of these institutions naive to the teaching of **oikourgous** as you perceive it, and the stricture you would force upon our family?

In addition to others, I suspect for reasons like those just mentioned that even a young Paige Patterson conceded, “There are certain conditions, more often temporary than permanent, that would make it permissible for a wife to work.” (*Living In Hope of Eternal Life*, p. 36) I find your position not only to be exegetically and theologically flawed, but also one which would, from a practical point of view, unnecessarily and excessively burden the whole work of Jesus Christ through both church and parachurch organizations.

I respect your scruple with regards to the application of **oikourgous** in your marriage and family. Fortunately, your financial situation allows your wife to remain at home. At this time in his life, your son needs the nurture and security that only his mother can give him. He needs his mother to love him as Paul instructs.

My wife provided the same love for our boys until their spiritual and educational needs recently changed. And in providing the nurture our children needed during their formative years, she never took a “mother’s day out,” seldom hired baby-sitters, left the boys with other adults, or

neglected them while socializing with other young women from the neighborhood or the church. For that matter, neither have we ever left our boys with our parents nor baby-sitters for a weekend escape.

At this time Margie reveals her love (*philoteknos*) by teaching at the school. We have asked both our boys, "If you could choose to either have or not have your mother teaching at the school where you attend, what would your choice be?" Both boys emphatically stated that they would much rather have their "Mom" at the school with them. For one subject, one of the boys even has his mother for his teacher.

So at this time, due to the ample and good reasons stated in this letter, we share neither your interpretation nor your application of *oikourgous* for our family. Our decision to allow Margie to teach at the Christian school violates neither the letter nor the spirit of Holy Scripture.

In providing for our boys' education through Margie's employment, our family is involved in no sin or hypocrisy. I have counseled with several other pastors about this issue and none have agreed that the concern you have expressed is essential or vital to the testimony of my ministry. The concern raised about Margie's teaching outside the home comes from inside, not from outside, the church. Her Christian-school ministry has in no way maligned the Word of God or given the enemy "opportunity for slander" (Titus 2:5; compare 1 Timothy 5:14.). In fact, the example she sets is positive.

Between us there need be no further "heavy" communication, verbal or written, about this issue. It is my hope and prayer that this letter will also help you to know what it is that our Lord requires of us in this area, and that you will experience the same liberty of conscience which I now enjoy.

But should you persist in thinking that my wife's Christian-school employment in any way damages the credibility of my ministry at the church, I would invite you to bring the concern with me before two or three other invited spiritual men or elders (1 Timothy 5:19-20). And if that should not resolve the issue satisfactorily as you see it, then we can take it before the church body (Matthew 18:15-17), but I do not see that *oikourgous* is relevant to the list of elder qualifications contained in both Timothy and Titus.

I commend you for confronting me privately about this matter. You have done right. Your question and thought has both stimulated my research and understanding on the subject. Future preaching should be clearer regarding the issue. The issue you raise has been particularly stimulating to me and forced me to grapple with questions which otherwise would have gone unattended in my mind and heart before God. Two pastors have even suggested that I submit the essential material in this letter for publication in a Christian magazine.

Now, I find my soul liberated through the knowledge and application of God's truth to our family living. The truth has freed me as Jesus has promised it would (John 8:31-32). And my heart is captive to and my conscience is clear before the Word of God concerning this matter.

Upon reading this, I am quite certain you will not initially agree with my conclusions, as I do not

find myself in total disagreement with some of the points you made in the letters you gave to me. Concerning this matter however, I believe we can—in love—agree to disagree. I understand and respect your position even though I do not embrace it. I trust that you will extend the same charity to our family (Romans 14:1-8).

Sincerely in Christ,

Pastor Larry DeBruyn