

Exegesis of 1 Timothy 2: 8-15

How do we understand and apply those Biblical texts that teach some sort of restriction on women's ministry? 1 Timothy 2.

The text that is most often cited as rationale for the restriction of women in both teaching and leadership roles in the church is 1 Timothy 2: 8-15. Much of the problem with the way this passage has been used to prohibit the teaching and leadership role of women has to do with a not fully taking into account the occasion and purpose of Paul's writing of the Epistle, as well as a propensity to translate key words and phrases in a way that presupposes the subjugation of women in the church. A careful analysis of both the **context** and the **content** of this passage (including reference to the way in which contentious lexical items are used in the wider canon), however, leads to an altogether more positive **conclusion** for the role of women in the scheme of creation and in the life of the church.

Context

Authorship of the first epistle to Timothy is attributed in the text itself to Paul (v.1), and most now agree that the claim of authorship is genuine. The letter was sent to the Christian community at Ephesus, through Timothy whom Paul had appointed temporary overseer of the Christian community, specifically to help suppress false teaching that was rife in Ephesus in the first century, and must be interpreted in the light of particular circumstances. Paul clearly states the reason for Timothy's presence (and for the letter) in 1:4-8 "...so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine". Paul reinforces the importance of διδασκαλία - 'sound teaching' or 'doctrine' in several places (e.g. 4.13 and 16). The fact that the letter has no personal greetings like the other Epistles, suggests that it was meant for a wider readership and to be of benefit to the whole church. Indeed it is unlikely that Timothy himself, whom the author calls γνησιῳ τέκνῳ ἐν πίστει ('my loyal child in the faith'), would have needed some of its basic Christian doctrinal teaching.

This Epistle was intended as a treatise on orthodox Christian teaching to correct false teaching in the church and to instruct the Christian community. Fee (1988) calls it a 'Church Manual'. It is important to note that the false teaching Paul is so keen to redress appeared to encourage self-promotion, to challenge traditional domestic structures and to have particularly caught the attention of the women of the church. 1 Timothy is less a letter about how to order the church and more about how to counter heresy and false teaching. The whole flavour of the letter is corrective. For example, we're not told much about *how* to appoint church officers, but we are told that they should be of good character and sound teaching (3:1-13). We're told that 2 church leaders have been expelled (1:20) and some need to be rebuked (5:20).

The letter also keenly addresses the demeanor and behaviour of women in the church. In fact, the combined weight of the subject matters of false teaching and women amounts to 60% of the content of the letter. Much of the correction is aimed at women – they are told about how to behave in worship (2:10-15), we're given qualifications for women deacons (3:11), told about appropriate pastoral behaviour (5:2), how to support widows (5:9-10) and the correction of younger widows (5:3-8 and 16). There is clearly something seriously wrong with the women when we're told that "... *some have already turned away to follow Satan*". (5:15). This seems to apply especially to the young widows addressed in 1 Tim 5:11-15 whom Paul calls φλυαροί ('gossips') and περιεργοί ('busybodies'). One of the effects of the false teaching seems to be that the women are challenging existing domestic structures: 1 Tim 4:3 "*They (false teachers) forbid marriage*"

The Ephesian church may have been coming under the influence of what Scot McKnight refers to as the 'New Roman Woman', an aggressive, confrontational, public presence in society represented by women who dressed sexually provocatively, snatched the podium at public events, and were kind of first century 'ladettes'. New Roman Women also might have been influenced by the cult of Artemis, where the female was exalted and considered superior to the male. This Goddess cult that had high priestesses, and there was a huge temple to Artemis in Ephesus. One of the key teachings was that Artemis, a goddess, took as her companion a male, human consort. Artemis appeared first, then her male companion. And Artemis was said to 'save' or 'keep safe' her female adherents. They rejected normal sexual relations and marriage and childbearing, even exercising abortion.

Also present in the early church in Ephesus was an "over-realized eschatology." A "have it all now" view that claimed that a "spiritual" resurrection had already happened (2 Tim 2:18). It seems to parallel the situation at Corinth where marriage was downgraded to a less spiritual state. This would have "liberated" some of the Ephesian women from traditional family responsibilities. It seems likely that one or all of these factors was affecting the worshipping life of the Christians in Ephesus.

□ Content

In line with his intention to exhort the Ephesian Church to live Godly and decent lives, Paul begins Chapter 2 with a call for them to pray: "*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone*". In v8, he gives a corresponding instruction on how to pray: "*I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument*". The structural parallelism of these two verses can be seen in the parallel use of the conjunction 'therefore' (or

'then'). Furthermore, ὡσαυτως – 'likewise/also' - at the beginning of v.9 indicates that the instructions to women are to be considered in parallel with the instructions to men which precede them: "*also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God*". Paul is urging women and men the church in Ephesus to pray, and more importantly to pray for those in authority over them, so that they might live well within the structures in which they find themselves.

The word for 'dress' (καταστολη), implies both what was worn and the deportment of the wearer. The adverbs 'modestly and decently' are applied as qualifying statements. This word for dress appears elsewhere only in Hebrews 12:28 and indicates appropriate reverence. The alternative is brash gold and pearls, which were identified with sexual wantonness. Therefore, whilst using the principle of dress, Paul seems to be concerned with attitude – high standards of decency, so that the church should be above reproach. It represents another way of living a quiet and peaceable life in godly service and obedience.

Paul then moves to address the issue of authority in v.11. This is a related problem. The issue of dress and the issue of insubordination are linked around the idea of immodesty: the tendency to insubordination is another expression of the immodest attitude of some women in Ephesus. Verses 11 and 12 are carefully structured. The emphasis given to the manner in which a woman should learn is clearly seen in the use of the inclusio where 'quietness' is seen as the key point in v.11 and then repeated in v.12. This structure focuses our attention on the two adverbial phrases that qualify Paul's imperative, 'silence' and 'with full submission'. The word often translated 'silence' is *hesychia*. However, there are clearer alternatives that Paul could have used if he had meant literally not speaking. Furthermore, there are other passages in Paul's writing that condone women speaking in worship e.g. 1 Cor 11:5 "*but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head*". So what does he mean by *hesychia* here? It is the same word as is used 9 verses earlier in 1 Tim 2:2 "*so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable (hesychion) life in all godliness and dignity*". It is more likely to mean 'quietly and peaceably', again reinforcing the view that Paul's point in writing is to counter destructive and chaotic heresy.

The second adverbial phrase '*with full submission*' raises an important question about who the women are meant to be submitting to. Usually when the word υποταγη is used in the NT it refers to submission to God the Father, and of all Christians to each other in the fear of Christ. Therefore it continues Paul's earlier points concerning attitude; the women are to submit themselves to God and his Word. Silence is associated with learning

throughout the Bible¹ and the phrase ‘silence and full submission’ is a formulaic cliché, used to suggest a willingness to heed and obey instruction”.

Moving to v.12 this makes further sense if the unusual verb ‘to have authority’ is understood in its strongest sense as ‘to dominate’. *Authentein* is a hapax legomenon; this is the only place *authentein* occurs in the NT. The other 2 places it comes in the Bible are 3 Maccabees where it refers to ‘originating from’ (as in ‘author’), and the Wisdom of Solomon where it refers to child murder! It is an unusual word. If Paul wanted to refer simply to the normal exercising of authority by women (for example in church leadership) he could have used one of the other 12 possible words that have been translated ‘authority’ in the NT. The main alternative is ‘*exousia*’, which he uses elsewhere (e.g. in 1 Cor 11). *Authentes* literally means ‘*auto-hentes*’: ‘to do something with ones own hand’. In Greek literature of the time, this word is most often used to refer to murder or suicide. It usually means ‘a crime of violence’. So how can it be translated simply ‘*have authority over*’? *Authentein* is authority in the strongest sense– ‘to dominate’; ‘to control in a domineering, violent manner’. A better translation is KJV “*I suffer not a woman to teach nor usurp authority over a man*”. So in choosing *authentein* Paul seems to make a specific, nuanced point. Women held clear authority in other churches (e.g. Priscilla, Phoebe and Junia in Romans 16). So he was ‘permitting’ there. Why not here? Again it throws us back to the central purpose of his writing about combating heresy and providing a peaceable counter-cultural Christian alternative.

The instruction about domineering authority is linked to the word ‘to teach’. “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man.’ It is worth noting that the related verb, *οὐκ επιρροπῶ*, here is in the present tense ‘I am not permitting’. The use of the indicative tense indicates an immediate context: “*I am not presently permitting*”. It is specific to the current situation. When the verb ‘to permit’ (*epitressein*) is used in the New Testament, it usually refers to a specific permission to do or not to do something in a specific context (Matthew 8,21; Mark 5,13; John 19,38; Acts 21,39-40; 26,1; 27,3; 28,16; 1 Cor 16,7).

The word *διδασκειν* refers to the *activities* of a teacher. It is always used with another verb that qualifies what sort of activities these are.² In this passage the corresponding verb is *αυθεντειν*. This is because *ουδε* is most often used to join two negatives that are closely related. Linda L Belleville explores the other places in the NT where this kind of construction is used (two ideas linked with neither/nor, either/or), ‘*ouk*’ and ‘*oude*’ (‘to teach or to have authority’). This correlative construction is a literary device that pairs related or similar ideas. Belleville shows several possible ways that the 2 ideas can

¹ Isaiah 41:1; Habakkuk 2:20; Zechariah 2:15.

² cf. 1Timothy 1:34; 4:11; 6:2; 6:3

relate to each other. Here it is a relationship of 'defining a related purpose or goal'; you do something so that you can do something else, e.g. Matthew 6:20, "*where thieves neither break in nor steal*" (i.e., break in so that they may steal). Here it would be: "a woman may not teach so *that she may dominate a man*". The meaning of the verse is therefore to be found in the linking of the two imperatives. It indicates that the *kind* of teaching a woman cannot do is related to αὐθεντεῖν; that women must not teach *in a certain way or to achieve a certain purpose or goal* - that they do not teach heresy. The sentence could be accurately translated: "*I do not permit a woman to teach so as to gain mastery or domination over a man*". Once again, Paul asserts that *when* a woman teaches, (as she does elsewhere in his letters) it should be in a peaceable and submitted (to God's Word) manner, in the same way as she learns, and not with the purpose of dominating a man.

And so we turn to what have been regarded as some of the more problematic sentences in the Scriptures: vv.13-15: ¹³*For Adam was formed first, then Eve;* ¹⁴*and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.* ¹⁵*Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.* γὰρ ('for') at the beginning of v.13 indicates that what follows is justification for what has gone before. However, Paul does not give the order of creation as a *reason* for the subjection of women. Rather, he re-establishes the orthodox Christian creation story as a *response* to the Gnostic teaching which occasioned his injunctions for women in the Ephesian church. rather than 14-15 being *in support of* 11-13, or a rationale, they are *refutation* of a widespread Gnostic heresy relating to the supremacy and originality of woman. The author reestablishes the orthodox story of creation³.

If we remember the Artemis cult that was causing such a problem for the church in Ephesus, we recall that it was said that Artemis was created first and the man afterwards. Paul here reminds the church that it's the other way round for Christians "Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Eve was deceived". In Romans 5:12-19 Adam takes the flack as the 'representative man'. Here Eve is singled out as the representative woman. Why? Because the *women* of Ephesus were being deceived. This is not 'men behaving badly', but 'women behaving badly', and Paul uses the example of Eve's deception to illustrate this. It all adds weight to his injunction that a woman *should* learn, so that she grasps fully the true gospel message and is *not* deceived.

The reference to the creation order is often used as evidence this is a universal instruction applying to all women in all churches for all time. But 1 Cor 11:3-16 is also used in connection with a creation order motif, and that is all about cutting hair and wearing veils, and we don't say the same thing

³ There are several other instances where Paul indicates a heresy before refusing it with orthodox Christian teaching – 1 Cor. 15:12-27; 2 Tim 2:17-19; 1 Tim 4: 3-5; Romans 3:8)

generally about that passage.

Part of the difficulty in arriving at a comprehensive and convincing interpretation of this part of the text lies in the variety of references to women as the subjects of clauses. It is sometimes difficult to work out to whom the author is referring.

In v.9 we read γυναικαζ ('the women' - NRSV). In v.10 it is γυναιξιν ('women') which indicates a more general and indefinite frame of reference. It may be that v.9 refers to women in the church specifically, whilst v.10 is meant more generally for all (Christian?) women. In v.11, γυνη ('a woman') leads some to suggest that here the command is specifically to wives. In v.12, γυναικι ('woman') is in the context of the negative 'no woman'. In v.14, γυνη, the NRSV translates as '*the* woman', meaning Eve (even though the same word was translated in v.11 as 'a woman'). Also, there is a switch in number between σωθησεται ('*she* will be saved') and μεινωσιν ('[if] *they* remain'). There has been much debate surrounding to whom 'she' and 'they' refer. Presumably 'she' refers back anaphorically to 'the woman' of v.14, setting up Eve as representative of all women who will be saved even if 'they' (back to the general reference) continue in their feminine role of motherhood (see discussion below relating to v.15). This variation has, not surprisingly, led to a great deal of speculation about the precise reference intended for each of these subjects. Tied to this is confusion about the relevance of this passage for women in general. Since it is unclear whether the author intends to refer to women in the worshipping assembly, Christian women in general, women in the city of Ephesus or women throughout history, there arises ambiguity concerning the relevance of the instructions given here.

How do we understand the assertion that a woman will be saved 'through (δια) childbearing'? Obviously women are *not* saved (in the sense of gaining salvation) through childbearing. That would make a mockery of the work of Jesus on the cross and condemn to hell all those women who have not had children. Alternatively, it can't mean that women will be saved (or kept safe) *through* childbirth, if they are faithful, loving, holy and modest. Many women with precisely these virtues have tragically died during childbirth. The preposition 'through' is used with the genitive case. If it were with the accusative, it would mean 'on account of...' or 'because of...', thus implying that women are saved *by the act of* childbirth. However, the genitive suggests the meaning 'during' or 'whilst'. This is likely another repudiation of the Gnostic belief that women must become like men (i.e. giving up their motherly rights and fertility) in order to achieve salvation. The verse might mean that women can be saved *while they are still in a childbearing state*, i.e. while they are feminine. In this vein, McKnight suggests that Paul aims to counter the view of the sexually promiscuous New Roman Woman, for whom getting married and having children was, quite frankly, boring and oppressive. Paul counters this view with one that says that childbearing is a

good and Godly path for a woman. It doesn't mean that *all* woman must marry or that *all* woman should have children, but if you do, it's good – much better than a noisy, sexually promiscuous life.

In addition, as we have seen, part of the problem in Ephesus (as in Corinth) was an over-realized eschatology – an 'over-excitement' about the return of Christ, thinking we actually have it all now; the 'now' without any 'not yet'. If Jesus is coming back soon, why do we need any of the norms we have lived by before? One of the babies that (literally) got flung out with the eschatological bathwater was a right emphasis on marriage and gender distinctions. There were certainly women in the church in Corinth who thought themselves so 'holy' that they didn't need to concern themselves with any thing earthly, like men and babies. Paul reasserts to the Ephesians that women who had children *could* find themselves among the saved. It is good to be a woman and to bear children. You can still be part of the exciting spiritual life that looks forward to Jesus return. Remember also that the Artemis cult promised to 'keep safe' or 'protect' her women followers. Paul is saying that Christian women must rely on Jesus alone to save them in faith and love and holiness.

□ Conclusions

Many commentators have taken these verses to apply, not just to the context of Christian women in worship in first century Ephesus, but to the conduct of all women throughout history in the Church, thus perpetuating the prohibition on women speaking in church, exercising authority and developing their ministry. For example, Knight says that these verses illustrate the conduct of women based on the order of creation, citing the fall as "the dire consequences of a reversal of leadership roles". What he and other commentators fail to take into account is the unique and individual situation into which the Epistle is written. They fail to see that heretical teaching was the key issue, and to interpret it in this light. We need to take seriously the very important task of interpreting in the light of historical context and of paying closer attention to a more accurate translation of key words and phrases in the light of their use elsewhere in Scripture. When this is done, the passage is, not Paul's manifesto for the universal and permanent subjugation of women, but a unique insight into the potential dangers occur when *any* one group in the church (women or men), tries to take control inappropriately. Paul's theme and his intention refer to the Christian church providing a counter-cultural alternative to false teaching and cults. What kind of false teaching or cults might be around today? Perhaps we might think about an over-sexualized culture that says it's OK for men and women to use each other without regard to family life and mutual respect. That it's OK to do whatever feels good to you and there are no moral, sexual absolutes or ethics. How do we live peaceably within this culture?

This passage is not about not conforming to stereotypes as men and women that the society we live in puts on us, if they go against what we know to be true in Christ Jesus. We might recognize stereotypes that say that all men are macho and aggressive and that all women are concerned with gold and pearls, clothes, 'Heat' magazine and cosmetic surgery. As Christians we have our own right ideas of what men and women together might be like. Let men pray. Let women learn. Men are spiritual. Take women seriously.

This passage affirms gender and family life as part of God's good plan, indeed God's salvation plan. It is good to be a mother or a father. Bringing new people into the world and raising them within the love of God. That is an important God-given task. It should not be scorned. It should be done with love, faith, holiness and modesty.

Above all this passage encourages us as men and women to live well together. We are called to live peaceably, not to be angry or domineering, but to support and up build each other and refuse to add to people's wrong impressions of Christianity. It's about men and women taking their place in the church, praying, doing radical good works, learning, teaching, submitting to the Word of God, not domineering, countering deception and working together for the coming of Christ's on kingdom earth.

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