

## NOTES ON 1TIM 2:12 (on women teaching in the church)

### CONDUCT IN GOD'S CHURCH

When Paul<sup>1</sup> wrote his first epistle to Timothy, it appears his purpose was to give instruction concerning conduct in the church at Ephesus (3:14–15), with particular reference to certain persons teaching false doctrines (1:3).<sup>2</sup> These teachers were from within the church (1:3–7, 19–20; 6:3) and conceivably included elders, which accords well with Paul's previous warning to the elders of this church (Acts 20:29–30).<sup>3</sup>

It is possible that the false teachings had a direct influence on the conduct of some of the women in the church (5:14–15 *cf.* 2 Tim 3:6–7). There is a considerable amount of space dedicated to women in the epistle, generally in a negative or admonitory tone (2:9–15; 3:11; 4:6–7; 5:3–16). It does not necessarily follow, however, that all the issues Paul addressed were present in the church at Ephesus or that they resulted from the false teaching. Nevertheless, an adequate exegesis could not neglect these possibilities when analyzing any one section of the letter.

The second chapter is especially relevant for today's church, and yet is often discussed apart from its cultural setting and literary context. This chapter, particularly 2:9–15, is the most significant text in the debate over the role of women in the church.<sup>4</sup> Among those who view Scripture as somehow normative for today's church, the meaning of this text ultimately will govern their position on this issue.<sup>5</sup>

### THE CULTURAL SETTING

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<sup>1</sup>I accept this epistle as authentic contrary to the majority opinion of critical scholars. See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 607–649.

<sup>2</sup>The precise nature of the doctrines is a matter of debate. In fact, Paul gives relatively few specifics about the false teaching; presumably, Timothy knows the problem first hand. However, for the purpose of this paper, the substance of the false doctrines is secondary. See Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 378–380.

<sup>3</sup>Gordon Fee limits the false teachers in the church at Ephesus to elders ("Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28.2 [1985]: 142–148).

<sup>4</sup>David M. Scholer, "1 Timothy 2:9–15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 193–194.

<sup>5</sup>Space does not permit interaction with those approaches that neglect or dismiss this passage based on its so-called lack of genuineness, skewed hierarchal bias, or cultural irrelevance.

The saints of the primitive church were living in a male dominated society where women had few rights. However, the assessments and roles of women in the Greco-Roman culture was not static throughout the empire. Interestingly, “The sphere where women enjoyed the greatest degree of public freedom in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds was religion. The evidence for their participation in religion is extensive.”<sup>6</sup> This is reflected in the New Testament (Lk 1:41–45; 2:36–38; Acts 16:16–18; 21:9; 1C 11:2–16; Rv 2:20–23 *cf.* Rom 16:1; 1 Tim 3:11).

Within the Jewish culture, a woman was considered in her relationship to the males in her life, first her father, then her husband. Women were legally subordinate, always under the authority of men. However, Jewish literature, like that of the Greco-Roman world, viewed women on a continuum between two extreme poles: with total disdain as legal property to respect and dignity as valuable members of society (particularly in the home), even with prominent roles in public life (social, economic, and political). There is also evidence that Jewish women played various roles in public worship.<sup>7</sup> This also may be reflected in the New Testament (Matt 13:56; Acts 16:13–15; 18:26).

The Old Testament view of women is not as narrow as some assert. There are certain leadership roles limited to men (*e.g.*, the priesthood, Ex 28:1ff), and certain rituals seem to place a higher value on males (*e.g.*, Lev 12:1–5). However, leadership is not limited entirely to males (*e.g.*, Deborah, Jud. 4–5), and the powerful role of the prophet is shared by women (Miriam, Ex 15:20; Deborah, Jud 4:4; Hulda, 2K 22:14). Gen 1:26–27 declares the equal value of male and female as both were created in the image of God and given authority to rule over the creation. Paul reemphasizes this in Gal 3:28, by declaring the male/female value distinction (common to their culture) was invalid in Christ. Entire Old Testament books are committed to the exaltation of women (Ruth, Esther, and Song of Solomon).

#### THE LITERARY CONTEXT

Peter Bush argues that the high degree of parallelism between 1:12–20 and 6:11–16, 20–21 suggests they were intended to serve as *inclusio* sections bracketing the body of the letter, *as part of the body*.<sup>8</sup> Although they do form an *inclusio*, they serve that function *outside the body* as part of a personal introductory thanksgiving (1:3–20, *cf.* χάρις in vs. 13) and a personal paraenetic

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<sup>6</sup>Gregory E. Sterling, “Women in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds,” in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1993), 85.

<sup>7</sup>Randall D. Chestnutt, “Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman Era,” in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1993), 119–120.

<sup>8</sup>“A Note on the Structure of 1 Timothy,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 152 – 156.

conclusion (6:11–16, 20–21a).<sup>9</sup> The body properly begins in 2:1 with παρακαλῶ οὖν πρῶτον πάντων,<sup>10</sup> and gives general instructions for the whole church. Thus, in the former section, Paul entrusts the gospel tradition to Timothy, and in the latter, he points Timothy to God as the authoritative source of the tradition. Paul is neither the originator nor final authority in these matters, God is.

There are markers in the body of the letter that help detect its structure: ταῦτά σοι γράφω...ἵνα (3:14–15),<sup>11</sup> παράγγελλε ταῦτα καὶ δίδασκε (4:11), ταῦτα δίδασκε καὶ παρακάλει (6:2), and παράγγαλλε (6:17–19).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, I suggest the following structure for the epistle:

- Salutation (1:1 – 2)
- Introduction and thanksgiving (1:3–20)
  - The problem of false teaching (3–11)
  - Inclusio* – Paul entrusts Timothy with the God’s gospel (12–20)
- Body (2:1–6:10, 17–19)
  - Conduct in God’s church (2:1–3:16)
    - prayer and teaching in the assemblies (2:1–15)
    - servants of the church (3:1–16)
  - Combating false teachings (4:1–11)
  - Various roles in the church (4:12–6:2, 17–19)
    - Timothy (4:1–16)
    - widows and younger women (5:1–16)
    - elders (5:17–25)
    - servants and masters (6:1–2)
    - teachers (6:3–10, 17–19)
- Paraenetic Conclusion (6:11–16, 20–21a), *Inclusio* – Paul entrusts Timothy to God’s authority
- Closing (6:21b)

#### THE CURRENT DEBATE

<sup>9</sup>Note the change of subject in 6:11, σὺ δέ with παραγγέλλω...σε in 6:13–14. On vs. 17–19 see footnote 12.

<sup>10</sup>See Jack T. Sanders, “The Transition from Opening Epistolary Thanksgiving to Body in the Letters of the Pauline Corpus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 348–362.

<sup>11</sup>The confession of vs. 16 is the foundation of the church in vs. 15 and therefore connects better with what proceeds than what follows in 4:1ff.

<sup>12</sup>The content of 6:17–19 suggests it should follow 6:10, and the content of 6:11–16 links better with 6:20–21. This appears to be a slight “digression,” perhaps caused by Paul’s eagerness to address Timothy personally on these issues.

Within the evangelical community,<sup>13</sup> there are three basic positions on the role of women in the church based on 1Tim 2.<sup>14</sup> First, the *traditional* view<sup>15</sup> maintains that Paul's words prohibit Christian women from teaching Christian men and limit the role of leadership in the church to men. This prohibition is culturally transcendent and is therefore normative for today.<sup>16</sup> Some, who hold this position, view 1Tim as a manual on "church order" intended by Paul for the future church that it might function effectively in his absence.<sup>17</sup> Second, the *cultural* view agrees with the traditional view concerning the meaning of Paul's words, but argues the prohibition was culturally specific—Paul was addressing the needs of the hierarchical society of the first century—and therefore not normative for today. They argue that male/female roles are determined based on cultural norms, not theological considerations.<sup>18</sup>

Third, the *occasional* view maintains that Paul's words were prohibiting a particular abuse in the Ephesian church, and therefore are normative only when similar occasions arise. For example, Gordon Fee argues Paul was addressing the problem of wayward elders in Ephesus and the young widows following them who were disrupting the house churches.<sup>19</sup> Catherine Clark Kroeger argues that Paul's prohibition was against (proto-Gnostic) false *teaching* (not women teachers *per se*), which proclaimed, "Eve predated Adam and was his creator."<sup>20</sup> Paul W. Barnett argues the prohibition prevents an *elder* from being taught in the assembly by his or another man's *wife*. By submitting to her

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<sup>13</sup>I include my own tradition within this group with regard to its view of Scripture and Scripture's normative role in the church.

<sup>14</sup>For the moment, I am disregarding the presuppositional biases through which interpreters approach the text, and I am assuming they arrive at their respective positions ostensibly on historical/exegetical grounds alone. There is a continuum within each view, but I will focus on the essence of each view only.

<sup>15</sup>The names assigned these views are my own.

<sup>16</sup>Douglas Moo, "What Does it Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11–15," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 179–193.

<sup>17</sup>Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1980), 191–208.

<sup>18</sup>James G. Sigountos and Myron Shank, "Public Roles for Women in the Pauline Church: A Reappraisal of the Evidence," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26.3 (1983): 283–295.

<sup>19</sup>"Reflections," 142–146.

<sup>20</sup>"1 Timothy 2:12—A Classicist's View," in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 232.

authority in public, it would undermine his effectiveness in managing his own household, and consequently the church.<sup>21</sup>

The context suggests readers should view this passage trans-culturally, as the traditional view supposes.<sup>22</sup> At least four factors effectively undermine every effort to specify culturally or occasionally Paul's words. First, nothing in the language or syntax suggests such limitations.<sup>23</sup> Second, Paul's appeal to the account of the creation and fall (Gen 2–3), for justification of his admonition, effectively universalizes his intent. Third, although the historical setting of a male dominated culture may have indeed prevailed at the time of writing, this in no sense means Paul's admonitions were controlled by that reality. As an inspired prophet of God, Paul was controlled by the Holy Spirit (2Tim 3:16–17). At no time was a prophet of God compelled to cower to the dictates of his culture.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the culturally and occasionally specific views of this passage appear to be influenced by postmodern thinking and so motivated by the dictates of their own politically correct culture. Accordingly, many interpreters use fanciful and imaginative grammatical and theological gymnastics to circumvent the seemingly simple and obvious intent of the passage.

Much of the current debate centers on the meaning of ἀυθεντεῖν (to have authority over, to domineer), its relationship to διδάσκειν (to teach), and whether ἄνδρός (man)<sup>25</sup> is the object of one or both of the infinitives (2:12). Because of the multiplicity of meanings of ἀυθεντεῖν in the first century AD, there is no consensus. However, all agree one prominent meaning was “to have

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<sup>21</sup>“Wives and Women’s Ministry (1 Timothy 2:11–15),” *Evangelical Quarterly* 61.3 (1989): 225–238.

<sup>22</sup>The underlying principle of modesty in verses 9–10 is, of course, universally viewed as trans-cultural. However, even in this context Paul does not appear to be specifically forbidding braided hair, jewelry, and expensive garments [how expensive is expensive?], but only as these things detract from modesty. A near parallel admonition is given in 1Pet 3:3–4, *And let not your adornment be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses, but let it be the hidden person of the heart...* Is Peter forbidding “putting on dresses” (ἐνδύσεως ἱματίων, lit. “putting on garments”)?

<sup>23</sup>As for example in 1C 7:26.

<sup>24</sup>This may be exactly what motivates Paul to appeal to propriety and “nature,” and perhaps even “back off” of his admonitions in 1C 11:2–16. However, it is unclear how absolute Paul's instructions are in this Corinthian case.

<sup>25</sup>This is the word for “male” (ἄνῆρ) as opposed to “female” (γυνή), in contradistinction to the generic ἄνθρωπος meaning human without necessary regard for gender. The context is clearly gender specific. It is men (ἄνῆρ) who are to lift holy hands in prayer (8 cf. 12) and Paul addresses only women (γυνή) concerning modesty, learning, and teaching (9–12).

or exercise authority,” and the context of 1Tim supports this idea.<sup>26</sup> The second question concerns the relationship of ἀϋθεντεῖν to διδάσκειν. Are the two infinitives describing two activities (“to teach” and “to have authority over”), or one type of activity (“authoritative or domineering teaching,” the infinitives taken as a hendiadys)?<sup>27</sup> A variation on this would be to understand teaching as inherently authoritative and therefore expressing one action, but this would seem redundant. If Paul is describing two activities, is “of a man” the object of “teach,” as well as “to exercise authority?” Grammatically, it could be, and contextually it would seem to be demanded.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Paul could be prohibiting “women from conducting either activity, whether jointly or in isolation, in relation to men.”<sup>29</sup>

### WOMEN AND THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST

The churches of Christ represent one of three main branches coming out of America’s largest indigenous religious movement from the nineteenth century, commonly called “the Restoration Movement.” In an effort to restore New Testament Christianity the movement evolved out of Puritan ideals, with a methodology shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and “Common Sense Realism.” The Bible came to be a trans-cultural “handbook” for the movement, and this was particularly true for the more conservative element that would eventually become the churches of Christ. The more liberal element in the movement became the Disciples of Christ, and the moderates became the Christian Church.

With regard to the role of women, the more conservative believed that the woman’s place was in the home training daughters for maternal responsibilities, and sons to engage the outside world. The woman’s sphere of influence was strictly the home, and it in turn provided a shelter for her modesty and virtue. The more liberal voices in the movement

*found the cause of woman’s rights acceptable when associated with those whom they saw as modest females campaigning to save or preserve the sanctity of the home. Working under both the assumption of woman’s moral superiority to man and the belief that the female was more inclined to protect the family than the male, ecumenical ministers*

<sup>26</sup>Leland Edward Wilshire, “The TLG Computer and Further Reference to ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΩ in 1 Timothy 2.12,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 120–134.

<sup>27</sup>Carroll D. Osburn, “ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΩ (1 Timothy 2:12),” *Restoration Quarterly* 25 (1982): 1–12.

<sup>28</sup>Women are clearly not forbidden to teach in other contexts, particularly of unbelievers (2Tim 1:5; 2:15 cf. Titus 2:3–4; Acts 18:26). However, in a context with believing men present, where women are to “learn in silence with all subjection” (ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ μανθανέτω ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ) (2:11), it is difficult to imagine how they could then teach in that context.

<sup>29</sup>Moo, *Recovering Biblical Manhood*, 187.

*granted to women a much wider social and church role. Liberal churchmen believed that women should preach because the tender pleadings of the more virtuous sex were missing from the pulpit; they assumed that mothers should vote because they would protect their children by supporting prohibition, the abolition of prostitution, and the outlawing of gambling; and they believed that women should engage in moral reform because "organized mother love" would bring the virtues of the Christian family into society as a whole.<sup>30</sup>*

In the twentieth century, conservative voices in the churches of Christ echo much of what the early liberals said. However, with few exceptions, they maintain a tight control over the woman's role in the church. Their position was and continues to be anchored on 1C 14:34–35 and 1Tim 2:8–15.<sup>31</sup>

How do local autonomous bodies of Christ resolve an issue that well respected scholars and faithful Christians cannot seem to agree on? How can the average member of a congregation determine whether he or she should understand Paul's words as trans-cultural, accommodating a particular cultural viewpoint, or addressing a particular congregational abuse?

First, there must be a commitment to God's word and an unwillingness to divide the body of Christ over matters that can be resolved by compromise. Compromise does not mean compromise of *truth*; it means compromise of *practice*. The more "liberal" or "progressive" believers promoting more active female teaching roles should be willing to resist forcing the issue at the risk of causing stumbling among some believers and/or division in the church. Is it an issue the church *must* pursue for the church to function as it should in proclaiming the gospel of Christ? At the same time, traditionalists might recognize that by totally restricting women in the assembly the church has probably gone further than what Paul intended. Have they gone as far as first century Jews in "building a hedge around the Law of God" by adding laws God never intended and so nullifying God's words by their tradition (Matt 15.1–14)?

Second, there clearly needs to be a greater emphasis on the spiritual equality males and females share before God and the equal value their respective roles have—whatever those roles might be—in his kingdom. An intelligent and honest reevaluation is required to help the church break the shackles of cultural presuppositions in which every member is bound. As long as interests remain focused on the well being of each member's relationship to God and one another, this issue can find resolution.

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<sup>30</sup>Fred Arthur Bailey, "The Status of Women in the Disciples of Christ Movement, 1865 – 1900" (Ph. D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1979), iv.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 43. See also Carl Spain, *The Letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus* (Austin, TX: R. B. Sweet Company, Inc., 1970), 45 – 52.