

The Role of Women in the Church

Paul wrote to Timothy, who gave pastoral oversight in Ephesus (1 Timothy 2:11-12 NIV):

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.
¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”

Many issues strike the modern reader about this text. In what *context* do these restrictions appear? What is *meant* by “exercise authority” and is it negative or neutral? Are these limits *culturally* defined, applying only to first century Ephesus or to today too? If they *apply* today, then how—which ministries convey authority and are limited to men? These four issues are addressed below.

I. **Context:** Do these limits apply to both private and public arenas?

- A. The six chapters of 1 Timothy alternate from teaching for Timothy (1), the church (2–3), Timothy (4), the church (5:1–6:10), and finally back to Timothy (6:11–21). The basic exhortation is that he makes sure order exists in both in his personal life and the church.
- B. Our text on women concerns order within *public worship* for these reasons:
 1. “I urge, then, first of all,” (2:1) indicates a change in subject from the more private “Timothy, my son” exhortations (1:18) of the previous context.
 2. The command, “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer” (2:8) does not mean women cannot pray in private. The context is the gathered church assembly.
 3. The prescription for modest dress (2:9–10) would make little sense privately.
 4. The exhortation for women to “learn in quietness and full submission” (2:11) obviously refers to the public assembly since parents—both mothers and fathers—are elsewhere commanded to teach children at home (e.g., Deut. 4:9–10; 11:14).

II. **Meaning:** Is “exercise authority” the best translation?

- A. The text of 1 Timothy 2:12 not only prohibits women from teaching men in the worship service, but it also does not allow them to “have authority” (NIV, NLT, RSV) over men in this context. However, some argue that this prohibition not to “exercise authority” (NASB) has a negative connotation. In this sense, doesn’t Paul mean that women leaders should not “usurp authority” (KJV) in a domineering manner over men?
- B. This Greek verb (*αὐθεντέω* *authenteo*) can have either the negative meaning of “to domineer” or the positive idea of “to have authority over” (UBS dictionary).¹ It is used only here in the Bible, making the sense difficult to determine as no NT cross-references can be consulted. However, the word is used many times in Greek literature from the first century BC to the fifteenth century AD. Henry Scott Baldwin wrote the most detailed study of *authenteo*. He concluded after studying 82 uses outside the NT that it has an unambiguously negative meaning (“tyrannize”) only *once*.² Some claim that Paul could have used a more common

¹ The negative sense is also indicated as possible in Thayer’s Lexicon, though Thayer applies a neutral meaning to 1 Tim. 2:12: “*αὐθεντέω* *αὐθέντῳ*; (a biblical and ecclesiastical word; from *αὐθέντης* contracted from *αὐτοέντης*, and this from *αὐτός* and *ἐντεα* arms [others, *ἐντης*, cf. Hesychius *συνέντης* *συνεργός*; cf. Lobeck, *Technol.*, p. 121]; hence, a. according to earlier usage, *one who with his own hand kills either others or himself*. b. in later Greek writings *one who does a thing himself, the author* [*τῆς πράξεως*, Polybius 23, 14, 2, etc.]; *one who acts on his own authority, autocratic*, equivalent to *αὐτοκράτωρ* an absolute master; cf. Lobeck ad Phryn., p. 120 [also as above; cf. *Winer’s Grammar*, sec. 2, 1 c.]); *to govern one, exercise dominion over one*: *τινός*, 1 Tim. 2:12.*” Note that the negative sense applied only before and after NT times while the first century sense was neutral: *to govern or exercise dominion over*.

² H. Scott Baldwin, “A Difficult Word,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, eds. Andreas J. Kostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995], 75.

word for “authority” if he simply meant authority in a neutral or positive sense.³ But each word for “authority” has a range of meanings.⁴ For *authenteo*, “the root meaning involves the concept of authority,”⁵ without referring to how that authority is used.⁶ Therefore, the idea of it being negative is unfounded.

- C. Yet 1 Timothy 2:12 has two infinitives, not just one: “I do not permit a woman *to teach* or *to have authority* over a man.” Some say that “these two infinitives joined by the word ‘neither’ (*οὐδέ*) communicate a single coherent idea”⁷ so that only *one limit* is imposed—*authoritative teaching* in a worship service. It is true that teaching and authority are linked closely so that the sense of one of them also applies to the other. Either “both items proscribed are viewed negatively or positively. Thus, the verse either means ‘I do not permit a woman to teach falsely or domineer over a man’ or ‘I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.’ The latter option is demanded, for there is no evidence here that the infinitive *διδάσκειν* [“to teach”] should be rendered ‘to teach falsely.’”⁸ In other words, since “teaching” is positive, “authority” must also carry a positive sense. However, teaching and authority are distinct concepts so the idea of only *one* prohibition here (“*authoritative teaching*”) cannot stand up exegetically.

III. Culture: Does the prohibition from teaching and leading men apply today?

- A. Interestingly, these limits were never challenged in the church during the first nineteen centuries. However, since the rise of feminism (and evangelical feminism in particular), some modern interpreters say that Paul’s commands are culturally conditioned—applicable only in the first century. This assumes that women of his day could *not* teach men publicly—either in the Jewish synagogue or in the Gentile city of Ephesus where Paul sent his 1 Timothy letter.
- B. So how did women function in public worship in the first century? The assumption above is correct. Paul was consistent with the generally restrictive limits of his time. In fact, in the synagogues not only did women *not* teach, but they also worshipped in a different section.
- C. But what about Ephesus where Timothy ministered? Other evangelical feminists advocate that Paul was going *against* a prevailing liberalism in women’s roles. They seek to portray a “feminist Ephesus” so that this text “is not directed against women participating in leadership but rather against a *monopoly* on religious power by women.”⁹ However, even in Roman-Greco political groups and in the Artemis cult in Ephesus, it was still the *men* who occupied

³ Andrew C. Perriman, “What Eve Did, What Women Shouldn’t Do: The Meaning of *AYΘENTEΩ* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 135; Richard and Catherine Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman; Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 84; Alva Mickelsen, “An Egalitarian View: There is Neither Male Nor Female in Christ,” in *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, eds. B. Clouse and R. G. Clouse (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 202; David M. Scholer, “1 Timothy 2:9-15 and the Place of Women in the Church’s Ministry,” *Women, Authority, and the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 205; Philip H. Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction* (JSNTSup 34; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 216; Ben Wiebe, “Two Texts on Women (1 Tim 2:11-15; Gal 3:26-29): A Test of Interpretation,” *Horizons in Biblical Thinking* 16 (1994): 59-60; all cited by Thomas Schreiner, “A Dialogue with Scholarship,” in *Women in the Church*, 132, n. 120.

⁴ Schreiner, 132.

⁵ Baldwin, 79.

⁶ Despite the above evidence, some still favor the negative sense of “domineer”: Gordon D. Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen, 1988), 73; Timothy J. Harris, “Why Did Paul Mention Eve’s Deception? A Critique of P. W. Barnett’s Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2” *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990): 342; Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen, 1992), 109; Carroll D. Osburn, “*AYΘENTEΩ* (1 Timothy 2:12),” *Restoration Quarterly* 25 (1982): 1-12; Philip B. Payne, “Libertarian Women in Ephesus: A Response to Douglas J. Moo’s Article, ‘1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance,’” *Trinity Journal* 2 n.s. (1981): 175; Towner, *Goal of Our Instruction*, 215-16; Ben Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 121-22; Clarence Boomsma, *Male and Female, One in Christ: New Testament Teaching on Women in Office* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 71-72; Steve Motyer, “Expounding 1 Timothy 2:8-15,” *Vox Evangelica* 24 (1994): 95-96; all cited by Schreiner, 133.

⁷ Philip B. Payne, “*Οὐδέ*, in 1 Timothy 2:12,” paper presented at the 1988 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 104-8; Boomsma, 72-73; Motyer, 96; all cited by Schreiner, 133. Kostenberger, 82-84 critiques Payne.

⁸ Schreiner, 133.

⁹ Kroegers, 93, emphasis mine (cited by S. M. Baugh, “A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century,” in *Women in the Church*, 15).

the highest positions—both in politics¹⁰ and in religion. In fact, the priests who served the majority of pagan deities in Ephesus were men!¹¹

- D. However, though Paul's teaching of predominant leadership for men (not women) was consistent with both pagan and Jewish practice, he did not support his stance by appealing to culture. In verses 13-15 he appealed to the trans-cultural creation order. Since Adam was created first (2:13), male headship applies to all cultures and all times. Male leadership is also based on Eve's sin of being deceived so that sin entered the human race (2:14). For this reason, God's plan is for women to lead their children rather than lead in the church services (2:15).¹² While many say that a woman training her children at home does not fully utilize her gifts, this is certainly not the view of Scripture. God has a very high view of the impact of parents in their children's lives.

IV. **Application:** Which church ministries convey authority and thus are limited to men?

- A. Churches today often decide women's roles based on pragmatism rather than God's Word. Some say that since some women are gifted as teachers, they can teach men in the church service. This pragmatism does not address the limits of 1 Timothy 2:12. Such decision-making based on experience rather than the Bible assumes women must exercise their gifts in a mixed (both sexes) worship service. However, many other avenues of ministry outside the worship service exist: women's and children's ministries, parachurch groups, etc. Countries like China rely extensively on the teaching of "Bible women." God will require an accounting of the church in each culture as to the degree to which the Bible affected culture (or vice versa). Some churches reason that they lack godly men, but we must decide what our authority will be.
- B. Our church holds the Bible as final authority, even where it makes unpopular demands. Article 4.6 of our Constitution states, "The Bible is the inspired Word of God written without error, our only sure source of knowledge about God and His plans, and our absolute guide for doctrinal teaching and godly living (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21)." Since Scripture disallows women from teaching or having authority over men in the church assembly, the leaders have concluded that we will follow God's limits. Therefore, women do not teach by preaching to men in our church services.
- C. How else does Paul limit women from exercising authority in a worship service? Surely singing a solo or singing on the worship team does not have authority, but being the worship leader may convey such authority. In the OT, both men (1 Chron. 9:33) and women (Neh. 7:67) served as temple singers and instrumentalists, but men always led the worship (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:4-6). However, in NT churches (unlike in the synagogue/temple), men and women sat together. We assume that NT saints followed the OT pattern of male worship leading based on the creation order and the injunction for men alone to pray publicly (1 Tim. 2:8). But this is an assumption so we show latitude here and at times have had female worship leaders.

¹⁰ "There were a number of primary magistrates and civic groups at Ephesus. No women are known to have filled these magistracies at Ephesus in the first century" (Baugh, 18).

¹¹ If a supposed feminine supremacy in religions in Ephesus was true, "We would expect to find either priestesses or other women controlling the resources of the [cult of Artemis] and appointments to its offices. Instead, Ephesian religious affairs were governed by the Roman and municipal authorities who were decidedly male" (Baugh, 24).

¹² This verse states, "But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety" (2:15). Either "saved" has a [less-used] meaning of "preserved" or, if it refers to spiritual salvation, the verse is an appropriate response to false teachers at Ephesus who denigrated marriage (1 Tim. 4:3) and childbearing. Adhering to this God-given role of childbearing still will not save, so Paul adds character qualities that show real faith.

V. Do You Agree or Disagree?

To explore your own ideas on this vital subject, please mark as A, U, or D beside each statement below to show whether you Agree, are Unsure, or Disagree with the teaching.

- A. A woman cannot serve as a pastor-teacher with authority over an entire church.
- B. A woman cannot serve as an elder (or other role on the highest ruling council) of a church.
- C. A woman cannot be the main worship leader in the church worship service.
- D. A woman cannot be an adult Christian Education director with authority over male teachers.
- E. A woman cannot be a children's Sunday school director with authority over male teachers.
- F. A woman cannot teach a mixed adult Sunday school class at the church building.
- G. A woman cannot teach a mixed adult cell group at a private home.
- H. A woman cannot teach a mixed biblical studies course at a seminary or Bible college.
- I. A woman cannot teach a mixed non-biblical course at a seminary or Bible college.

VI. Conclusion

Believers who take 1 Timothy 2:12 seriously find the above agree-disagree statements difficult. Where does one draw the line? As advocates of grace, our church believes that women should be given as much latitude as biblically possible. Scripture does not prohibit women from teaching men in private contexts such as Priscilla and Aquila did with Apollos (Acts 18:26). This would allow them to teach any course in the seminary, as well as teaching and serving in most leadership positions within the church. In fact, Scripture grants women authority to direct men in *most* local church positions, except (a) being an elder (repeated "he" and "husband" of 1 Tim. 3:1-7), (b) serving as a deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-12), (c) leading as senior pastor (an elder position), and (d) the public assembly context of 1 Timothy 2 requires women to listen rather than to teach *in that worship service only*, and to follow rather than to exercise authority over men *in that worship service only*. Surely many women are as gifted by the Spirit as are men (both now and in Paul's day), but this is not the issue. The point is that both NT examples and commands impose the above as universal limitations in their roles. That these limits are not applied in many (especially missionary) settings does not absolve our church from obedience. Therefore, we agree with statements A & B above, we're unsure with C, and disagree with D-I.

The four questions addressed in this paper thus have the following answers:

1. Context: Do these limits apply both privately and publicly? *They relate to public worship only.*
2. Meaning: Is "exercise authority" the best translation? *Yes, it has a neutral or positive sense.*
3. Culture: Does the ban on teaching and leading men apply today? *Yes, it is trans-cultural.*
4. Application: Which church ministries convey authority so are restricted to men? *First Timothy 2:8, 12 limits women from teaching or authoritative leading (e.g., public prayer) in a church worship service. Other texts limit them from being an elder (esp. pastor-teacher) or deacon.*

The cliché says, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." Was it true years ago before the rise of feminism? Is it true today? How can women have the greatest impact for Christ? Paul believed in marriage and in the great influence that mothers have over their children (1 Cor. 7:14). He also wanted people to do the most for the cause of Christ—men and women alike. For this reason, he continued the age-old practice in the first century of keeping women in the most influential place possible in society: the home (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15). However, women are also gifted of God to serve Christ in thousands of ways outside the family, with the exception of the few public context positions noted in the NT.

Approved by the elders of Crossroads International Church on 5 December 2006