



## GOING DEEPER : I TIMOTHY 2:9-15

We have already seen that the passage in I Timothy 3:1-7, which lists qualifications for those serving as elders in the church, does not itself place any gender limits on those so qualified. Though our modern English translations read quite otherwise, Paul used only gender-neutral pronouns and carefully avoided using any male pronouns in this passage, thus encouraging women as well as men to aspire to eldership.

Those who reject this conclusion—and, perhaps, those editors who artificially insert male pronouns in our English versions of this passage—likely justify their position by appeal to the passage that precedes it, particularly 2:9-15. In that section, Paul says (in part), “Let a woman learn quietly, with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.” (2:11-12)

The way one interprets I Timothy 2:9-15 colors the way one understands whether or not women can serve in leadership roles in the church. And nearly all theologians and scholars who have tried to interpret this passage have recognized complexities that make that task difficult. That is, getting it right is not as simple as lifting verses 11 and 12 from their context and using them as a “controlling” statement under which every other Scripture relevant to these issues must be subsumed.

Any interpretation of Paul’s overarching meaning in I Timothy 2:9-15 depends upon answering several more specific questions. These include at least the following: Are the prohibitions contained here (and especially in vv. 11 and 12) meant universally—that is, as applying to female believers in all places and all times—or in a more limited and particular context (that of the 1<sup>st</sup>-century church in Ephesus where Timothy was pastoring when Paul wrote this letter to him)? What is the meaning of the verb *authenteo* in verse 12? Does our understanding of Paul’s meaning here cohere with all of the rest of Paul’s teachings regarding women and

teaching or speaking? Was there a specific problem in the church at Ephesus at the time of the writing of this letter that helps explain the scope and intent of these difficult lines?

### **UNIVERSAL OR LIMITED?**

First, it should be noted that nearly all interpreters of this passage—regardless of whether they are hierarchicalists or mutualists on the question of church leadership—acknowledge that Paul’s meaning here (and more specifically in vv. 11-12) must be limited in some way. One reason for this is that the words with which Paul introduces the prohibition (in v.12, *ouk epitreo*; “I am not permitting” or “I do not permit”) are difficult to reconcile with a universal prohibition, and instead make better sense with a particular case in view. More basically, there are simply too many other places in Paul’s epistles in which he seems to acknowledge, encourage, and even praise the teaching, instructing, and prophesying by women so gifted in the early church. Moreover, several of Paul’s and, more generally, the New Testament’s teachings about the equality of all believers in Christ (see, especially, Gal. 3:26-29) and concerning the equal way in which all believers are given the gifts of the Spirit (I Cor. 12 and 14) clearly preclude the possibility that Paul here intends a universal prohibition on the speaking or teaching of a woman in church.

In I Corinthians 12, in particular, Paul’s argument is that each believer must use his or her gifting to help the local church to be the complete body it was called to be. In this extended church-as-body metaphor, which takes up all of our chapter 12-14, Paul does not limit any such gifts by gender. Moreover, in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit falls upon all believers, and Peter, in explaining this event at Pentecost, quotes the prophet Joel (2:28-32), who predicted that God’s Spirit would be poured out “on all flesh,” including even “male servants and female servants,” and causing “sons and daughters” to prophesy. Thus, a universal prohibition on women’s teaching would be at odds not just with Paul and the rest of the New Testament but also with a significant portion of Old Testament prophecy.

### **WHAT LIMITATION THEN?**

If the situation requires that some limitation be placed on these statements in I Timothy 2, the most obvious possibility is that there was some problem specific to the church in Ephesus that Paul was addressing with these prohibitions. And historians today have more

information than has ever previously been available upon which to base conjectures about the early Ephesian context.

But for those who seek support in this passage for the view that Paul envisions a gender-based church hierarchy, there must be some other limiting explanation. While other ideas have been proposed, perhaps the most common is this: Paul is not saying that women cannot teach; rather, women cannot teach *authoritatively* (or women can only teach if there is a man in authority over her, with the ultimate responsibility for what is being taught being with him). Alternatively, some argue that Paul means that, whereas women can teach other women (and children), they cannot teach if adult males are present. For each of these interpretations, there still remains a universal principle, in that the prohibition applies within the church across place and time (rather than being specific to the 1<sup>st</sup>-century church in Ephesus). There are several problems with each of these hierarchical suggestions, and none of them fully explains all of the facts requiring explanation. Here, in brief, are the most important of those problems.

First, if any such widespread prohibition was intended, it would have been a simple matter to use language that would have made that clear for all time. Indeed, here would have been an ideal place to do just that. The prohibition here is not presented as a command, and does not employ words (like the Greek for "never" or "anywhere") that would indicate an application of it to all times and places. The very fact that there is still so much uncertainty about what this passage had in view is itself evidence against its being intended as a widespread and timeless principle.

More broadly, no such clear prohibition—against women teaching or having leadership roles—is found anywhere in the New Testament. This fact also applies to the more limited senses of "women must not teach authoritatively" or "women must not teach men," further undermining the argument that either of these is the correct interpretation of I Timothy 2:12. Similarly, there is no example in Scripture of any converse way of stating such a principle, such as "only men may teach (in this way)" or "only men can be elders."

A further problem—for the view that Paul has in mind some sort of *authoritative* teaching—is that the words he uses to describe teaching here do not differentiate that teaching from the

sort he encourages women to undertake in other churches and Scripture passages. To put it another way, the idea that there is a special category of teaching (such as “authoritative doctrinal instruction”) is not explicit here or anywhere else in Paul’s writings.

We have seen that even hierarchicalists recognize that I Timothy 11-12 must be interpreted in some sort of limited sense, and that (in part) because there are numerous instances elsewhere in Paul’s letters and in the New Testament where women are encouraged to teach. But their proposals for how to understand these verses do not alleviate this problem. That is, we can find instances where the teaching by women thus encouraged or affirmed elsewhere in Scripture was occurring in mixed-gender assemblies (e.g., Acts 18:26, I Cor. 14:26, Col. 3:16) and, in some cases, most certainly constituted authoritative doctrinal teaching. A clear example of the latter would be Priscilla’s teaching of Apollos (I Cor 16:8, 19), who would go on to become one of the principal teachers of the early church. In sum, the hierarchical solutions do not actually solve the problem they were designed to address.

## **CONTEXT MATTERS**

Another problem with hierarchical interpretations of this passage (and of misinterpretations of Scripture generally) is a willingness to divorce it from its context. The interpretation we take to be correct understands the entire letter as a coherent argument against false teaching and behavior, one that sees 2:9-15 as an extension of what precedes it and as cohering with what is written after, all the way through chapter 6. By contrast, understanding 2:11-12 as a timeless prohibition against women teaching (either when males are present or in an authoritative manner) depends upon isolating these verses and paying little or no attention to their place in Paul’s larger argument. Moreover, whereas a fully contextualized interpretation allows us to see this letter as the well-crafted product of a brilliant (and inspired) mind, hierarchical claims leave Paul seeming to be inattentive and scattered in his thinking (though all of the minute ways in which this is so are beyond the scope of this paper).

A careful reading of I Timothy yields the understanding that the main theme of this letter is a warning against false teaching. For Paul, of course, false teaching and immoral or inappropriate behavior go hand in hand, so the false teaching at issue here is intertwined with practices that are unbecoming those who are in Christ. That being so, a hierarchical reading of 2:9-15 almost *requires* that Paul is here setting aside his theme (of false teaching)

to establish (albeit obscurely, and contrary to his teachings elsewhere) a principle prohibiting women from teaching. For if, in this passage, he is still concerned with false teaching, why would Paul seek to protect *men* from the false teaching of these women while allowing these same women to teach their false doctrines to other women and to children? Or why prohibit these women from teaching false doctrine in an *authoritative way* while allowing them to continue to teach falsehood so long as it is done informally, or only when they are not under the oversight of a male?

### **OTHER ISSUES**

There are other aspects of this passage that must fit in to any interpretation that claims to be the right one; I identify just a few of these here. One is Paul's use of the rare verb *authenteo* (in v. 12), and how that is to be interpreted. Another is his references (in vv. 13-14) to creation and the fall and how these fit his argument. A third and fourth are his mentions of salvation "through childbearing" in v. 15, and the change of pronoun—from "she" to "they"—in this same verse. A fifth is his use of the phrase "the saying is trustworthy," which our Bibles use to start chapter 3, but which likely applies instead (in Paul's thinking) to the discussion in chapter 2. These items are anomalous and unexplained within hierarchical interpretations, but fit nicely with an understanding that places 2:9-15 coherently within Paul's larger, letter-long argument.

### **THE PURPOSE OF THIS LETTER**

Much as we could wish that the purpose of this letter was to offer clear directions to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century church, about such things as the role of women and the qualifications for elders and deacons in *our* churches, this is not the case. Instead, Paul wrote this letter to his younger fellow pastor, Timothy, and its intent was to help Timothy address specific problems occurring at the time in the church in Ephesus, problems with which both of them were well-acquainted. Indeed, one of the problems that modern interpreters face is that the specific context of the problems occurring in this early church were not spelled out by Paul because they constituted shared knowledge and a subject about which the two of them had undoubtedly already spoken face-to-face. While it is worthwhile and valid for us, as modern followers of Christ, to glean what we can from this text about church leadership in our own time and place, we simply cannot make the mistake of thinking that what Paul wrote two

millennia ago was primarily for us rather than for Timothy as he attempted to pastor the 1<sup>st</sup>-century church at Ephesus.

To correctly interpret any of this letter, and particularly the difficult, controversial, and seemingly incoherent passage in 2:9-15, we must do our best to understand the situation in Ephesus at the time. Much of that situation has long been well-known, and brief descriptions can be found in many commentaries and introductions to this letter. But an even greater understanding can be achieved now that *Ephesiaca*, a secular novel by Xenophon (of Ephesus) that is set in Ephesus, has now been discovered to be contemporaneous with Paul's and Timothy's time ministering in that city.

### **EPHESUS AND THE EARLY CHURCH**

Ephesus was located at an important crossroads, and so was a center of travel and commerce. It was the capitol of the Roman province of Asia and one of the five most important cities in the Empire. It was also the center of the worship of Diana/Artemis, and her temple in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. (The Greek goddess Artemis and the Roman goddess Diana likely had earlier independent origins, but by the first century they had largely been fused into one.)

Regarding Christianity, Ephesus became an important center for the evangelizing of Asia Minor. While the 1<sup>st</sup>-century church there included a small number of Jewish believers, it would have been made up mostly of former pagans, including ex-worshippers of the goddess. As a result, it was susceptible to all manner of syncretic beliefs and practices, including an entire range of sexual acts that were both integral to the cultic worship of Artemis and diametrically opposed to the moral codes of Judeo-Christianity as laid out in the Torah and as taught by Jesus.

While members of both sexes were involved, Artemis worship was essentially female, and priestesses were the primary participants in both the ritual practices and the promulgation and teaching. Instruction involved loud, repetitive chanting, and so a successful priestess would have been both loud and sensuous, and would have become rich as a result of her leadership role. In addition, Artemis was the goddess of childbirth, and a central motivation for worshipping her was the belief that only she could protect a woman in labor and ensure

her survival. A further belief of the Artemis cult was that woman was created first, and that the first man came out of the first woman.

### **A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF I TIMOTHY 2:9-15**

We have already seen that nearly all scholars recognize that there must be some limitation placed on what Paul writes in I Timothy 2:11-12, that it could not be a comprehensive prohibition against all teaching by all women in any time or place within the church. We have also seen that hierarchical attempts to limit it—either to “authoritative” teaching or to teaching of men—do not satisfactorily explain the many anomalies that need explaining. And we have already argued that the most obvious place for finding a reasonable limiting scope for these prohibitions is the unique situation existing in the early church at Ephesus, about which the letter was written. Now that we better understand some of what was occurring in that early church in Ephesus, we are in a position to gain a better understanding of Paul’s intent in this passage.

Again, the theme of the entire letter is false teaching, and Paul is encouraging and instructing Timothy regarding how to deal with it. The letter begins (in 1:3-4, after its preliminary greetings), “As I urged you when going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, not to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies...” It ends (in 6:20-21), “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.” From beginning to end, Paul’s intent is to address false teaching—and to encourage right belief and practice—as regards the fledgling church under Timothy’s charge. Nothing in this letter is ancillary or irrelevant to that purpose.

For Paul, the concept of false teaching includes both false belief and false behavior, and both were clearly present in the church in Timothy’s charge. Some false teachers had already been dealt with, including Hymenaeus and Alexander, men who had been excommunicated by Paul himself (1:20). Other false teaching and immoral behavior remained, and it was now Timothy who needed to address these and the people guilty of them. Paul’s thoughts and instructions thus include identification of and exhortation to right Christian doctrine and behavior. They include appeal to and rejection of false belief and immoral and inappropriate

behavior. They include practical steps to ensure the former and eradicate the latter. And every section, paragraph, and chapter of this letter contributes to the same, targeted case in a coherent, cumulative argument.

In the section before us, I Timothy 2:9-15, Paul is addressing a very particular set of false beliefs and false practices, one that was unique to that city and time. Some of the new converts to Christianity there were women who had come from leadership roles in the temple and cult of Artemis. They were wealthy, dressed immoderately and seductively, and assumed for themselves roles of leadership and teaching commensurate with their old positions in the temple of Artemis. They had not left behind all of their cultic practices and beliefs, but had brought them with them into the Christian community, whether in the assembly or, as Andrew Bartlett argues, in going from house to house seeking male converts (and sexual partners) as they would have done as representatives of Artemis. They also still seem to have believed—and taught—the Artemis myths about the goddess being the protector of those going through childbirth and that (contrary to the Judeo-Christian understanding) woman was created first.

Given this background, all of 2:9-15—as well as the transition from it to the discussion of church leaders in chapter 3—fits into place perfectly. Paul has just written (in 2:8), “I desire then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling.” (The “then” refers back to the previous verses, in which Paul established his calling as the one entrusted with spreading the truth of the gospel to the Gentiles and thereby his right and responsibility to speak into the situation in the church at Ephesus.) With what we call verse 9, he turns his attention to women. And while some of the ensuing verses could be applied to themselves by all the women in that local church, what Paul has in mind is a particular finite group of women, those female leaders of the Artemis cult who had not yet left behind their former practices and beliefs.

Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair with gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. Let [such] a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I am not permitting [such] a woman to teach or to overpower [here’s that rare Greek word *authenteo*]; rather, she is to remain



quiet. For Adam was formed first, and then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. This saying is trustworthy.

Given the context of the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Ephesian church, Paul's prohibitions here make perfect sense. The behavior and teaching of this particular group of wealthy, promiscuous, loud, and heretical women needed to be curtailed, both for the sake of the church and in order that the women themselves might come to know full salvation in Christ. Paul's otherwise inexplicable appeal to the creation of Adam as being formed prior to Eve (in v. 13) was simply a direct refutation of the contrary creation chronology of the Artemisian cult. Similarly, his reference to salvation in child-bearing stands in direct opposition to these women's prior belief that such was the domain of Artemis; Paul is affirming (at least in part) that only Christ has such power. Paul's statement "The saying is trustworthy," which he invariably uses in regard to salvation, rightly serves as a conclusion to this (chapter 2) thought, even though it has been placed (by those who divided the text into chapters and verses) at the start of chapter 3, where it makes little sense. Paul's reference (in v. 14) to Eve's having deceived Adam serves to support Paul's concern that these particular women in Ephesus could in fact lead a male victim into immorality, and thereby supports a translation of *authenteo* as "to overpower" rather than any of the other (largely incoherent) possibilities chosen by hierarchicalists.

Thus understood, Paul's prohibitions here—to not teach or overpower a man—as well as his command to remain quiet are not meant to apply to all women in the church. Indeed, these directed prohibitions are not intended by Paul to apply even to *these* women in Ephesus for all time. Paul's subsequent instructions regarding the behavioral characteristics of church leaders (elders and deacons), which he introduces with words translated by the gender-neutral phrase "If anyone," could (and should) be understood as offering even these women the possibility of future church leadership. Paul's own dramatic conversion left him with the life-long understanding that there were no limits to the depths from which Christ could save someone or to the heights to which He could subsequently call them. This understanding is enhanced by the fact that for almost all of the qualifications listed for elders in I Timothy 3 (and in Titus 1) Paul elsewhere in those same letters applies that same characteristic

specifically to women, by way of encouraging them both to such a level of godliness and to aspiring to such leadership roles.

In summary, we simply cannot continue to use this passage from I Timothy 2 to exclude the saved, gifted, and called women in our own churches from any teaching or leadership roles.