

Women in Ministry

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Our Convention is currently faced with a decision on whether or not to continue our practice of ordaining women to the ministry of Christ for service and leadership in local congregations. Of course, the Convention itself does not do the ordination. In fact, God himself ordains people to ministry. Local churches simply recognize by ordination what God has already done. We need to recognize, first of all, that this issue is **not**, in my view, a matter of Biblical authority (both sides affirm that), but rather a matter of Biblical interpretation.

As Baptists we recognize many such areas of honest disagreement over the interpretation of Scripture, for example, while we all affirm that our Lord will come again, the timing and order of events leading up to that Coming are issues on which honest, Bible-believing Baptists (and others) may differ. We are not dealing with an issue such as the Lordship of Christ or salvation by grace through faith here. The issue of women in ministry is one about which honest disagreement can be permitted within the diversity of our Convention fellowship.

I want to begin by affirming the full authority of the Bible for our faith and practice both as individuals and as a Convention. I also want to recognize that those who may disagree with some of my positions on this issue also recognize that authority. When we affirm the authority of the Bible, however, we must not mistake that affirmation simply to mean that we must affirm that which our grandparents (or their grandparents before them) affirmed about it. Indeed, this would not be affirming the authority of Scripture, but the authority of tradition about Scripture. Unless God's Spirit had illumined the Bible in new ways for new days, our message would not be heard and historical events such as the Protestant Reformation would not have been possible. Let me share with you why I have come to affirm the full participation of both women and men in ministry.

Long ago, the prophet Joel spoke to God's people, at a crisis moment, concerning their descendants:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. And even on the male and female servants I will pour my Spirit in those days. Joel 2:28-29

Joel predicted that God would grant his whole people, without reference to gender, age or social status, the gift of his Spirit. Peter, in Acts chapter 2, said, "This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel," referring what Joel had said to the events of the Day of Pentecost. God's Spirit actually **was** poured forth on his whole people on that day, and if **God** has seen fit to pour his Spirit on all his own, empowering, e.g., both men and women for prophecy (and that is a public ministry; Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17), then the issue is, in fact, settled. It does not say that one group (men or ministers) is given more of the Spirit. God's empowerment for service is for God's whole people.

A closely related passage is Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This text asserts very simply and directly that **in Christ** (e.g., in fellowship with Him and incorporated in his Body the Church), these kinds of divisions (Jew/Greek, Male/Female, Slave/Free) are no hindrance to us. God, of course, made us the way we are (e.g., male or female), and we should be proud of that, but in Christ, these differences do not matter for full participation in the fellowship. If we are all one, then to single out some on the basis of these very categories and say that we are NOT all one, makes poor use of what Paul says here. These passages in Joel, Acts and Galatians, then, point us to the truth that God has empowered his whole people and that differences of which the world and the dominant culture makes much, in the sense of service to Christ, do not matter in his Church.

A crucial issue when we come to consider the question of whether women ought to be set apart for “professional” leadership in our churches is how we think of the ministry in the first place. The words that are translated as “minister” and “ministry” in the New Testament (e.g., in Mark 10:43 and Ephesians 4:12, AV) are, most often, simply the words for “servant” and “service” (diakonos and diakonia), not-the words “lord” or “boss” (kurios), only Jesus is Lord of the Church). The minister is a servant not an authoritarian boss in the local congregation.

Our model of ministry ought, of course, to be the Lord Jesus, who modeled his own ministry after the Old Testament Servant of the Lord (among others). The concept of the Servant has a rich background in the Old Testament. Jesus really settled what a Christian theology of ministry ought to be long ago. Mark 9 and 10 are chapters in which this is spelled out.

To begin, Jesus' own authority is clearly set forth at the beginning and the end of the passage (Peter's Confession, 8:27-30; The Transfiguration, 9:2-13; The Triumphal Entry, 11:1-11). In between these pillars, Jesus built his theology of ministry in his Church. In 9:30-31 Jesus predicted his death (and not for the first time). That the disciples did not understand what He has said is shown by the fact that they immediately set to quarreling about who had the most status and authority, and so who would be the boss after Jesus was gone (9:33-34). Jesus tried to show them a picture by placing a child in their midst and saying, “Whoever wants to be first, he must be the very last” (like this child), “and the servant of all” (9:35-37). Later, Jesus again set a child in their midst. Now, in Jesus' day, a child had no status in the community, no authority over people at all, and yet the child was pictured as the ideal as over against the Rich Young Man, who had all the status in the world, BUT none at all in the Kingdom of God (10:13-31). Why? Because this young man would not give up his status and put himself on the level with the poor (see vv. 21-22).

What Jesus is trying to show us in the Marcan portrait is that the language of status and authority over people is the wrong language for leadership in the Church. The

disciples still did not understand. Once again Jesus predicted his death (10:32-34), and this led to more wrangling about status. James and John came with their famous request to be made bosses in the Church (10:35-37).

Finally, Jesus set all indirectness aside and settled the issue plainly. He said:

You know that those who are regarded **as rulers** of the Gentiles **lord it over them**, and their high officials **exercise authority over them**. NOT SO WITH YOU. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you **must be your servant**, and whoever wants to be first must be **slave of all**. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42b-45)

Christian ministry does not consist in exercising authority over people. The whole language of power and domination over people is a foreign tongue to Christian (including Baptist) ministers, or ought to be. Ministry is service. All Christians, furthermore, are servants (e.g., Philippians 2:5-11), and so the Christian Minister is the servant among servants.

If this is our theology of ministry, then the whole question of women ministers asserting authority over men is not an issue. Ministers (neither men nor women) are not put in God's flock to exercise authority over people, but to serve. Ministry is, further, not the "job" of the few chosen ones, but of the whole people of God (Ephesians 4:11-13). The task of the "professional" minister is "to prepare God's people to do works of **service**" (Ephesians 4:12a). Christian ministry is service shared by the whole people of God.

There are, however, two passages in the New Testament which seem to fly in the face of the theology of ministry that we have found - at least as they are interpreted by some exegetes - I Corinthians 14:33b-40 and I Timothy 2:11-15. Some have seen these passages as forbidding women from exercising pastoral ministry in a local congregation. This is not the only, nor, I believe, the best interpretation of these passages. I will now attempt a study of I Timothy 2. Since this article is already getting too long I leave the study of I Corinthians 14 to others for now.

I Timothy 2:11-15

Introduction:

We must begin our study by stating some principles. First, we must not assume that we know what passages mean **before** we come to study them. What we may end up doing, then, is simply listening to what we would like them to mean or what they have been said to have meant. This, again, does not affirm the authority of Scripture, but the authority of tradition about Scripture. We must study each passage intensely. Second, we must affirm the principle that **Scripture interprets Scripture**. This means that we must start with passages that affirm a clear teaching and interpret less clear passages in their light, not the other way around. I have started with passages such as Acts 2:17ff and Galatians 3:28, and now proceed to these passages which reflect more specific local situations in the early church.

The Context:

Every book in the Bible was directed toward a specific time, place and people. 1 Timothy is no exception. The letter was written by Paul to Timothy who was an officer of the Ephesian church(es). In this situation there were, evidently, some specific problems with women in the congregation. Unfortunately for us, we can only get hints of this from what is corrected by Paul's message. There were probably some women, perhaps upper class women, who had opened their homes to the church and who, therefore, wanted a hand in running the affairs of the church, and who were engaging in debates and discussion, desiring to teach without competence to do so (1:3-7). These women are the ones addressed in chapter 2 (not all women in general). It is important for us to see that Paul was, like a good pastor, concerned to address the local situation in Ephesus.

The context in which this passage is found in the book of 1 Timothy is also important. Chapter 2 as a whole deals with the worship and public ministry concerns of the Ephesian local church. Chapter 3 turns to the administration of that body, chapter 4 deals with the immediate cause of the trouble, the false teachers, and 5: 1-6:2 with the pastoral oversight of the flock. We may derive relevant principles for modern ministry from what Paul says to this local situation, but we must not overlook that he did say all these things to a specific time, place and people. ¹

Translation:

May I offer the following fairly literal translation of the passage:

As for a woman, let her learn in a quiet way and completely submissively. I am not now permitting a woman to teach or to usurp the legitimate authority of a man. Rather she must behave quietly. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. But she shall be saved by the child birth, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with propriety.

There are several difficulties in this passage, and a certain amount of technical material cannot be avoided.

Study:

Paul, first of all, says that these Ephesian women should learn in quietness and submission. The first word does not mean silence, even though it has been taken to mean that by many translators. The same word is found, in slightly different form, in both vv. 11 and 12 to indicate a quiet and gentle demeanor. It is the same word used in 2:2 to describe the quiet life wished and prayed for rulers and those in authority. It would be quite odd to think of this as a wish that rulers never say a word. So this word “quiet” (*hesuchia*) should mean that these women should have a quiet and tempered spirit about learning. To this is added the word “submissive,” which here means a real learner's attitude, i.e., that he/she doesn't know everything before the teacher begins to teach. Some students always think they know more than their teachers. Paul forbids this attitude. The right attitude is picked up at the very end of the passage by the use of the words “faith, love, holiness and propriety.”

Most English translations imply that Paul forbade women to teach in the church or

to have authority over men. What is meant by the term “to have authority over” (*authenthein*)? This is not the common word for “authority” over someone such as a king or ruler might legitimately have (*huperoche*), found, e.g., in 2:2. Nor is it the common word for authority (*exousia*) such as Mark 11:28 where the religious leaders asked Jesus, “By whose authority do you do this?” This word is unique in the Bible. The literal translation is “self-actor”, that is one who acts without regard to others, a despot, a usurper of legitimate authority. It is the exact opposite of “quiet” and “submissive.” It may be pictured by the student who, although he/she hasn't learned nearly as much as he/she thinks, is willing to challenge the teacher at every point. We sometimes call it “the arrogance of ignorance.” My conclusion is that there must have been some women in Ephesus “coming on” this way and wrecking havoc with church teaching. They were incompetent but didn't know it.

Is this to be taken as a universal prohibition against women teaching? If so, we actually create more problems than we solve when we compare Scripture with Scripture. First, it is only this text and, perhaps 1 Corinthians 14, that bar women because of their gender. Other texts in Paul's writings permit or assume it.

Second, in all the lists of spiritual gifts (especially 1 Corinthians 12:28), the teaching gift is less important than the prophecy gift and women are allowed to, exercise prophecy (1 Corinthians 11:4, etc.). Gilbert Bilezikian says that this is like saying a woman cannot be a captain but can be a colonel in the army.²

Third, passages such as Colossians 3:12-17 are obviously directed at the whole fellowship (men and women). The mutuality and universality of the passage is evident. Christians are to “bear with **one another**” (13), “forgive **one another**” (13), “**teach** and admonish **one another**” (16). It will not do to exempt women from the teaching but not from the forgiving and bearing with one another. The word for “to teach” in Colossians 3:16 is the same one as here.³

Fourth, there are women teachers in Crete (Titus 2:3) who, although they taught other women, may have taught men as well. All these things go together to give the conclusion that Paul is responding to a special need in Ephesus, not making a universal proclamation.

Many will not follow this line, however, (and we must be careful not to suggest that there are no universal principles to be derived from this text) because, they say, Paul bases his argument for no women teachers on the order of creation itself, not simply on current practice. This still does not address problems we have seen with other Pauline passages, but it should lead us to look at the creation rationale for his prohibition here.

Paul explains himself by using a biblical illustration drawn from Genesis chapters 2-3. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” These are not two related facts. Eve was deceived because she was not created first. What does that mean? In 1 Corinthians 11:8-10 Paul also addressed the fact that males were created first, but did not draw any conclusion there such as a women's keeping quiet or not usurping authority.

According to Genesis 2:6-7 Adam was formed, and was, in v. 7, given divine instruction about the forbidden tree. The woman came into being after that prohibition was given (v. 22). She may have been told about the prohibition by

Adam (we are not told), but she was deceived. Why? Was it because she was a woman? The text of Genesis will not bear such an interpretation. The woman was deceived because she was created after Adam and after the divine instruction on the forbidden tree. Her mistake in Genesis 3 was engaging the serpent in a debate on a subject about which she was unprepared to speak. She usurped authority over Adam who did have adequate competence in this matter. The canny snake knew that she was unprepared and was the weaker point of attack on the matter.

The conclusion to draw from Paul's use of Genesis 2 and 3 here, and in the light of all that has been said about the difficulty of putting this passage in I Timothy together with others in the New Testament, is that the inadequately instructed (or learned or mature) Christian should be excluded from teaching, not on the basis of gender, but on the basis of incompetence. In the particular situation in Ephesus, the particular incompetents addressed happened to be women. In the modern world this is not necessarily the case. People without a knowledge of the Scriptures and a mature Christian outlook should not be teachers. They should be trained first.

This conclusion unlocks some other statements in the letters to Timothy. In I Timothy 1:6-7, there is a statement concerning those who want to be teachers but don't know what they're talking about (these women among others?). In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 there are no women overseers mentioned while women deacons are mentioned (3:11). The reason may easily be that the one key difference between overseers and deacons was that the former were to be "able to teach" (3:2 NIV). If, because of incompetence, these Ephesian women were not able to teach that explains their omission from the list. The reference to "weak women" in 2 Timothy 3:6 means that the problem in Ephesus did not fade away immediately. **In universal Christian practice**, then, the principle of competence in Christian teaching must be maintained at all costs. **In Ephesus at that time** this meant the exclusion of certain women from the teaching office.

But, even in Ephesus, it can be held that the situation as explained in this passage, was temporary (or possibly so). Paul's command in v. 12 is a present tense verb ("I am not now permitting a woman to teach ..."). This present tense command does not necessarily mean that the present situation is permanent.⁴ The case is not hopeless, and the answer is in quiet and submissive learning until competence is gained.

This may, at last, lead us to a satisfactory interpretation of I Timothy 2:15 which is a very difficult verse. The verse reads:

She will be saved by means of the childbirth, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with propriety.

It is a fact that, because a literal translation of this verse is difficult, most English versions paraphrase a bit. The first difficulty is the word "she" ("Women", NIV, NASB; "Woman," RSV). The Greek text (along with the AV, RV, and NIV note) reads "she".⁵ The "she" here must be Eve, who, although she became a transgressor (v. 14), was not hopelessly and forever mired in transgression. She was saved (from transgression) by means of, literally, "the child bearing." Most English versions do not translate the definite ("the") present in the Greek text here. In my view, this word "the" fulfills a well-attested and well-known function, i.e., it points to a particular and well known child birth.⁶ It is THE birth to which Paul refers here. The passage in mind is, probably, Genesis 3:15-16, the so-called protoevangelium ("first Gospel") in the account of humankind's Fall. Although Eve

was a transgressor, she was redeemed by means of the “birth” of the saviour (as are others). We must understand that this “birth” is a figure of speech for the whole of the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord.⁷

Another difficulty in this passage occurs when the “she” changes to “they” in the second part of the verse. The “they” here is, probably, the Ephesian women who had been barred from the teaching office. The grammar here shows that Paul sees it as possible that these women will continue in faith, love and holy propriety.⁸ This, together with Paul's present tense command (“I am not permitting ...”, v. 12) indicates that if these women persevere in faith, love and holy propriety, they will be able to regain the lost teaching office and share in it, as women did in other churches. Let me sum up the argument by citing a very helpful paragraph from Gilbert Bilezikian's book *Beyond Sex Roles*:

The solution for the proper understanding of this passage is to follow its development to the letter: women in Ephesus should first become learners (v. 11), and quit acting as teachers or assuming the authority of recognized teachers (v. 12). Just as Eve rather than Adam was deceived into error, unqualified persons will get themselves and the church in trouble (vv. 13-14). Yet, as Eve became the means and the first beneficiary of promised salvation, so Ephesian women will legitimately aspire to maturity and competency and to positions of service in the church (v. 15).

So, while this meaning is always the one derived from 1 Timothy 2:11-15, it is a meaning which grows out of the context, the grammar and syntax of both the passage itself and the wider context and meaning of the book in which it is found. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 does not forbid women, as women, from full participation in all the ministries of the Church of Jesus Christ, .

ENDNOTES

¹ An interesting new study of this passage's social context is found in Alan Padgett, “Wealthy Women at Ephesus: 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in Social Context,” *Interpretation* 41(1987), 19-31.

² Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 178. This book is the best all-round introduction to this issue now in print by an evangelical. Bilezikian teaches at Wheaton College.

³ The Greek word is *didasko*, a very common New Testament word. In Colossians the word is a present participle, here in I Timothy it is a present tense infinitive. It is also found in such passages as Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 1:5; 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 1:28; etc.

⁴ See, e.g., F. Blass & A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Trans. R. Funk; Chicago: University Press, 1961), Sections 318, 335, 336.

⁵ In fact, there is no separate pronoun at all, only the 3rd person feminine subject (“she”) implicit in the inflection of the verb *sothesetai*.

⁶ See e.g., Blass & Debrunner; *op. cit.*, sec. 252.

⁷ This figure of speech is, technically, called a *synecdoche*, which is a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part. See J. Middendorf, et. al,

“Vocabulary for Literature,” *Data-Guide's Reference Charts* (Flushing, NY: Data-Guide, 1958), ad. loc. For a much more detailed discussion of this kind of figure of speech in the Bible, one may use E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1898, repr. Baker Book House, 1968), pp. 613-656, with some caution.

⁸ This is the so-called Condition of the Third Class, which is a real condition of undetermined but possible fulfillment. It is usually constructed with **ean** plus (aorist) subjunctive in the protasis and (future) indicative (most times) in the apodosis. See, e.g. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), pp. 1016-1020; or, more compactly, A. T. Robertson & W. David, *A New Short Grammar of Greek New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933), section 353. See also, J. L. Boyer, “Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982), 163-175.

⁹ Bilezikian, op. cit., p 183.

Other works that may be consulted with profit are Mary J. Evans, *Women in the Bible* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1984) and A. Mickelsen (ed.), *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1986).

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