

I Do Not Permit A Woman To Teach

Essay #5

This is the 5th essay in our home church series and the 3rd in our look at the role of women in the assembly. The last two essays addressed the head covering passage and the section on women keeping silent – both found in 1 Corinthians. Now we'll turn our attention to 1 Timothy 2:13-15 where Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach . . ."

Background

Paul is forbidding (some) women to teach. Who are these women? What are they teaching? Why should they be prohibited from teaching? As with the Corinthian passages, here in Timothy background and context are quite significant in aiding our understanding of the text.

Paul is reminding Timothy in this letter that he is to stay in Ephesus (the destination of the letter) for the purpose of correcting false teaching (1:3-7). Some "want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm." (1:7). Paul even mentions two men by name who have "shipwrecked their faith" (1:19-20): Hymenaeus and Alexander.

Chapter 2 begins with a "therefore" in the Greek (the NIV has "I urge, then"). What follows, then, will be the detailing of how Timothy is to help ensure proper teaching is taking place. In 2:1-8 Paul addresses the need for men to be inclusive in their prayers. That is, they are to pray for everyone including those they might have chosen to exclude from their prayers. Gods want all men everywhere to be saved. We'll talk about the lifting of holy hands as a command in another essay but as a quick side note – most men in the churches I have been a part of have abandoned this command of lifting hands so we can see already that many men have determined that some of the commands in the immediate context do not apply across all cultures at all times for all Christians. And I think they are right.

Most scholars believe the context for these commands was the assembly of the Christians. It is not stated specifically that this is the context so I suppose other venues may be in mind but, as I said, most scholars believe Paul has the assembly in view here. Verses 9-10 deal with the attire of women in the church in Ephesus. Again, we have abandoned these commands in most of our churches in the USA in the 21st century. Any of you married women wearing gold on your finger?

Pearl earrings or necklaces? Have you ever braided your hair? Again, we generally understand these commands to be specific to some sort of ostentatious display on the part of some women in the church in Ephesus in the 1st century and not something to be bound on all women everywhere at every time. We believe the principle in play is that of being unassuming and not being flashy, etc. So in the immediate context we have already dispensed with two commands because we believe they applied only to a specific situation back in Ephesus.

When we get to the very next command, however, some of us have said this one is still in force while others say that it, too, was focused on a specific problem in Ephesus. Now I think it's important to recognize that both sides have good reasons for holding to what they believe here and it is understandable that we may see things differently. Does holding to one or the other of the opposing views exclude us from citizenship in heaven or from being part of the same family of God? I don't think so. It may mean that we may not belong to the same congregation for reasons of conscience but it does not mean we have to be enemies. In fact, we all make certain assumptions about these verses in Timothy that mention lifting holy hands, women's apparel and women's verbal conduct. We just don't all make the same assumptions.

Before looking more closely at the specific verses in question, let me point out another command from this letter we have decided to toss. Take a look at the commands about helping widows in 5:3-16. Take a close look now at verse 9. Does your church practice this command? Why not? Ah, but it is not the same today as it was then, right? Well, yes – that's probably right – and I guess that is my point. Just because we see something commanded it does not necessarily apply to all Christians everywhere at every time. Paul also makes comment about the character needed in elders and deacons. Jumping out of Timothy for a minute and looking at Titus – we see Paul talking about elders there, too. Take a quick look at Titus 1:5. How are elders supposed to be selected? Paul tells the evangelist Titus to appoint them. This passage in Titus and a passage in Acts 14:23 provide us with examples of how elders were appointed. It was done by an apostle or an evangelist. Is that how elders are selected and appointed in your church? Is it done by the evangelist? Ok, so you see my point. We have deviated from the "pattern" in numerous places and have felt justified in doing so. So let's be gracious toward those who may believe there are other areas besides these where deviation is allowed.

How About Those Women

Okay, back to the matter at hand – how about those women? What was going on there? Some believe that the commands regarding apparel are directly connected to the prohibition on teaching. Diodorus says that golden jewelry or clothing with a purple border was the sign of a prostitute. Lucian describes a husband who has to endure living with a wife who sits in front of her mirror putting on creams, powders, jewels, earrings, bracelets and necklaces and then visits various temples where she engages in intercourse with representatives of the various gods and then returns home. Philo says that such attire was connected with visiting temples, sexual misconduct and showing disrespect for the authority of the husband. In *Sentences of Sextus* 513 we read, “A wife who likes adornment is not faithful.” This cultural backdrop leads some to believe that some women in the church at Ephesus may have been acting in unsubmissive ways and needed to learn to behave differently. “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission” (2:11). The Greek word is *ἡσυχία* and means quietness in general.

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Paul now moves from unsubmissive dress and demeanor to unsubmissive teaching. Some believe verses 12-14 are meant to be applied to all women at all time in all places and is a blanket prohibition on a woman teaching a man (in the church – we have not applied this to the business world or academia). “The other view holds this is a temporary restraint to curb the inordinate conduct of certain Ephesian women who were teaching the heresy mentioned in 1:3-7 as the reason for the epistle. In this view, the Genesis material in vv.13-14 provides an example or explanation of how the deception of Eve having drastic consequences parallels that of the women in Ephesus.” (Osburn).

In verse 12, the phrase “to have authority over” is used only once in the New Testament and has the meaning of “to domineer.” The word “domineer” qualifies the word “teach” and specifies what type of teaching Paul is prohibiting. Paul forbids some women from teaching domineeringly. These women should be silent (*ἡσυχία* – quietness/peaceableness).

Adam & Eve

The reference to Adam and Eve has been taken in various ways as well. Some see it as a theological rationale that is forever binding and others take it as an example to underscore Paul’s

point, i.e., just like the serpent deceived Eve, so many of the Ephesian women have been deceived by the false teachers.

Saved Through Childbearing

Sometimes it seems like Paul wrote some stuff just to give us something to talk about! The meaning of this enigmatic expression has also been debated and understood in various ways. In Greek it actually says on account of THE childbearing. We know that Christian women are not always kept safe when giving birth. We know that some Christian women never have children at all. So some take this phrase to mean that Christian women should find their place in society by fitting into maternal and domestic roles. Another view is that despite Eve's transgression, Christian women will be saved through THE childbirth, i.e., Christ. Even though woman brought sin into the world she also brought salvation into the world.

Conclusion

Some Christian women in Ephesus have become domineering in their attitudes, dress and teaching and Paul is seeking to correct this situation. As a result, if women (and men) learn with a peaceful and gentle spirit (2:11) and teach in a peaceful and gentle manner (2:12) with good information (1:3), Paul would have no problem with women (or men) teaching. This interpretation dovetails with Paul allowing women to pray and prophesy in Corinthians unless they were abusing their verbal rights (and if they were abusing those rights then they must be silent).

Others maintain that this is a prohibition on women teaching men in any circumstance in the church (and also gets extended to other things such as passing communion trays, making announcements, giving testimonies, singing solos, etc.). One of the problems I see with this interpretation, however, is the inconsistency with which it is practiced by some of those who hold to it. For example, a woman may not pray audibly or teach or read scripture aloud but she may sing. Many songs, however, ARE prayers, instruction and scripture. And then there is the asking of questions in "Sunday School" or in a "Midweek Bible Study." Women are usually allowed to read scripture and ask questions in these assemblies even by those who believe that women should not speak. The rationale given is that it is not a real or "official" assembly. Why not? Because it is not in the auditorium on Sunday morning with the Lord's Supper being taken. But where in the New Testament does it ever say that the Lord's Supper has to be taken for it to be a "worship service" or a church assembly? I believe we may be mistakenly reading back into scripture through the lense of 21st

century American auditorium based church “service” and forgetting that Christians in the 1st century met mostly in homes and probably took the Lord’s Supper a lot more frequently than we are accustomed to (see the essay on the Lord’s Supper).

Well, regardless of which way we understand the prohibition in Timothy, I would like to suggest that our eternal destiny may still be secure even if we get it wrong. Strive to understand the details but don’t lose sight of the big picture in the process and be gracious to those who may hold to a view different from yours. They may have a good reason for doing so. Just hope I can live up to that myself.

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