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The Faith Once for All: Biblical Doctrine for Today

"The Role of Women in Church Leadership." p.431-442

C. Leadership and Gender

Sincere Christians have serious differences regarding the role of women in church leadership. The egalitarian (or feminist) approach begins with the assumption that God's original creation purpose was for gender to be irrelevant with respect to leadership roles in both the home and the church. One effect of Adam's sin was to replace this equality with a hierarchical relationship where only men may exercise authority and where women must be in roles of submission. One countereffect of the work of Christ, however, was to abolish this sinful hierarchicalism and to restore the original egalitarianism. This conclusion is usually drawn in part from Gal 3:28, which is taken to mean that no gender distinctions should apply to church leadership roles. Qualified women are just as eligible as qualified men to serve as elders, deacons, and preachers.

The other approach to this issue, called complementarianism (or hierarchicalism), is that God's original intention for the human race, established at creation, is summed up in 1 Cor 11:3, "The man is the head of a woman." The headship/ submission relationship did not originate with the Fall, but was only distorted by it. Jesus did not abolish male headship, either in practice or in his redemptive work. Galatians 3:28 addresses the equality of males and females only with respect to their access to salvation; it was never intended to apply to the question of role distinctions. The roles of headship and submission are still assigned to husbands and wives respectively (Eph 5:22–24), and women are excluded from roles that involve teaching men and roles that involve having authority over men (1 Tim 2:12).

1. Galatians 3:28

In my judgment this second view is the correct understanding of biblical teaching, and of the two verses that are crucial to the debate. The first of these verses is Gal 3:28, "There is neither Jew

nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (see Cottrell, “Galatians”; Cottrell, *Gender Roles*, 217–301). The key to understanding “neither male nor female” here is to ask why Paul links these three pairs (Jew/ Greek, slave/free, male/female) together in this context. What do they have in common? Why does he mention these three and no more? The context shows that it is a statement about full equality with respect to access to salvation; it is improper to generalize beyond this.

The historical context of Gal 3:28 is the false teaching of the Judaizers concerning the nature of salvation; the issue thus is *how to be saved*. The Judaizers were teaching the necessity of circumcision for Gentile converts. Galatians is written mainly to deny such a necessity: Gentiles do not have to be circumcised to be saved. How does 3:1–4:7 fit into this argument? This is very important: this section is an explanation of *why* Gentiles do not have to subject themselves to circumcision or to the Law of Moses in general, in order to receive salvation through Jesus Christ.

The salvation of which Paul speaks is of course salvation through Christ, but it is important to notice how Abraham is brought into the argument (3:8–9, 14, 16). Salvation through Christ is described as an *inheritance* received from Abraham (3:17–18). This concept of salvation as inheritance is the key to the right understanding of Gal 3:28. This inheritance, Paul says, is not based on law; it is based on God’s promise. That is, it is received not by following the rules of the Mosaic Law and by receiving circumcision, contrary to what the Judaizers were preaching. Rather, receiving the inheritance is a matter of believing the promise (3:18).

Here the metaphor of inheritance enters the discussion. The question is this: under the New Covenant, is “the blessing of Abraham” (3:14) *inherited* according to the rules of law, or according to the way a promise works? Verse 29 says we are “heirs according to promise.” We have received the inheritance, but *how*? Not according to law, but according to promise.

Why does Paul stress this point about inheritance, and the distinction between inheritance according to law and inheritance

according to promise? Because *if* we were still going by the Law of Moses, as the Judaizers claimed, *only certain people* would have access to this inheritance. This is true because the Law of Moses, embodying the common practice of the day, limited the inheritance of property to *free Jewish males*. That is, *Gentiles, slaves, and women* ordinarily did not inherit the family property. Some exceptions were introduced later, but according to the rules of the Law of Moses, under normal circumstances the only legitimate heirs were free Jewish males.

But, says Paul, it is different under the New Covenant, the covenant of promise. Technically Jesus alone is the only rightful heir to the Abrahamic promise, a conclusion based on the singular form of the word “seed” in Gen 22:18. But if this is so, how can anyone else become an heir to the promised salvation? The answer is simple: by taking on the identity of Jesus Himself! This is the point of Gal 3:26–27, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” When we identify ourselves with Jesus, we become heirs along with him. In faith and baptism we take on the identity of Jesus himself, i.e., his identity as a *son* and an *heir* (see 4:7). Even though there is only one true seed and one true heir of the Abrahamic promise, if we belong to Christ, then we too are counted as Abraham’s seed and *heirs according to promise* (3:29).

This is the only point of Gal 3:28. As far as salvation is concerned, it does not matter whether we are Jews or Greeks, slaves or free men, males or females. The only thing that matters is whether we *belong to Christ*. The rules of inheritance sanctioned by the Law simply do not apply. Herein lies the significance of the three pairs in 3:28. Under the rules of the Law, the “Greek,” “slave,” or “female” ordinarily would not be eligible to inherit; but in Christ the inheritance is not given according to the rules of the Law, so these distinctions are no longer relevant for salvation.

This, therefore, is the sole significance of Gal 3:28. **Anyone who is one *with* Christ inherits the blessing of salvation. It no longer matters if one is a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free man, a male or a female. All baptized believers are one *with* Christ,**

and thereby inherit salvation. The context shows that the end of this verse should be translated, “one *with* Christ Jesus,” not “one *in* Christ Jesus.” Paul’s point is not that we are all *one with each other* when we are “in Christ Jesus.” The point is that, through faith and baptism, when we clothe ourselves with Christ (3:26–27), we take on his identity and become *one with him* and thus share the inheritance with him.

In conclusion, as far as equality is concerned, “neither male nor female” refers only to equal access to the blessings of salvation through Jesus Christ. The context warrants no other conclusion. Those who wrongly assume that soteriological equality requires functional or role equality should read 1 Pet 3:1–7, which clearly shows that equality of salvation (v. 7) does not imply equality of roles (vv. 1–6).

2. 1 Timothy 2:12

The second verse that is crucial to the debate about gender roles is 1 Tim 2:12, “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.” It is true that earlier verses here (vv. 8–9) include some instructions that may be relevant only in first-century culture, but the main instructions (to pray and to wear modest clothing) are timeless principles. That verse 12 belongs in the latter category is seen by its connection with verse 13, where Paul gives the creation order as the *reason* why women may neither teach nor exercise authority over men.

Many egalitarians say that this verse was addressing a specific problem that existed only at that time and only in the Ephesian church; thus Paul was giving a temporary solution to a temporary, local problem. The problem was that certain liberated but as-yet-uneducated women in the church at Ephesus were teaching false doctrine and usurping authority over men in the process. Thus Paul’s concern in 1 Tim 2:12 was not that women were teaching and exercising authority over men, but that they were teaching false doctrine in a presumptuous manner. The problem, however, is that this alleged background situation has been fabricated basically out of nothing, for the sole purpose of allowing this verse to be interpreted in a way that is consistent with egalitarianism. That this passage actually has a straightforward complementarian meaning

will now be shown, as the verse is explained phrase by phrase.

“But” (de). This first word, the conjunction “but,” may seem inconsequential; but it is important because it shows that the content of verse 12 stands in some kind of contrast with verse 11, which says, “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness.” Since the two main words in verse 12 are “to teach” and “to exercise authority,” it seems obvious that these ideas are meant to contrast with “receive instruction” and “entire submissiveness” in verse 11.

Thus Paul is saying that women must study and learn Christian doctrine and have an understanding of the contents of the Bible, *but* they are not permitted to use their knowledge to teach men or to have authority over men. This knowledge may be used in many other ways, but not this way.

“I do not allow” (ouk epitrepo). This prohibition is very straightforward; it says unequivocally, “I do not allow.” This is not just the unbinding opinion of some ordinary male chauvinist; these words are spoken by an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ, one who was appointed to preach and teach in faith and truth (v. 7). As an apostle, Paul speaks with the very authority of the One who appointed him.

Some try to say that this command is not applicable today because *epitrepo* is in the present tense, which (they claim) means that the prohibition was intended to apply only to the time at which it was spoken, and not to the ongoing church. The present tense, they say, limited the application of the prohibition to that specific era. As one egalitarian says, Paul is simply saying, “I am not presently allowing a woman to teach” (Spencer, 85). Another says, “The present tense ... has the force of ‘I do not permit *now* a woman to teach’ ” (Bilezikian, 180). (This is part of the view that the temporary problem at Ephesus was uneducated women teaching false doctrine.)

The fact, however, is this: what these egalitarians are saying about the meaning of the present tense of the Greek verb is exactly the opposite of the usual and ordinary way this tense is explained. The present tense actually indicates *ongoing activity*, not limited, temporary activity. Action described in the present tense is

temporally open-ended, as in Heb 10:26 (“go on sinning”) and 1 John 3:9 (“continue to sin,” “go on sinning,” NIV). It is no different in 1 Tim 2:12.

“*A woman ... a man*” (*gynaiki ... andros*). Depending upon the context, the Greek terms used here (*gyne* and *aner*) can mean either “woman” and “man,” or “wife” and “husband.” Almost every NT translation takes them to mean “woman” and “man” in 1 Tim 2:12, but some contend that they refer to the husband/wife relationship. Paul is simply forbidding wives to teach and have authority over their husbands, they say. The implication is that this verse would not apply to roles within the church as such; it applies only within the home.

How can we decide what these words mean in this text? Since the words as such can have either meaning, the context is the key. In my judgment the context requires the meaning “woman” and “man.” In verses 8,9 the same words are used and surely mean “man” and “woman” in general. The same is true of *gyne* in verse 11. Also, in verses 13,14 Adam and Eve are cited to support the prohibition in verse 12. It is true that Adam and Eve were husband and wife, but when first created they were just “the man” and “the woman.” Adam represented all *mankind* (in the narrow sense of “man”), not just married men; and Eve represented all *womankind*, not just married women. As Gen 1:27 says, “Male and female He created them,” not “Husband and wife He created them.”

We should note also that verse 14 refers to Adam and “**the gyne**” (with the definite article), not Adam and “**his gyne**” (with a possessive pronoun). We would expect the latter if Paul were thinking of Adam and Eve as husband and wife, i.e., “Adam and his wife.” But he does not say this; he says “**the gyne**,” i.e., the woman. (We can say this confidently because elsewhere in the NT, unless it is clear from the context, possessive modifiers are used with *gyne* and *aner* to specify the meanings “wife” and “husband.” See Titus 3:5; 1 Cor 7:2; 14:35; Eph 5:22. But here no such modifiers are used.)

Another main contextual consideration confirms this conclusion, and that is the general context of the entire epistle. In 3:15 Paul informs Timothy that he is writing this letter “so that you

will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.” In other words, he states specifically that his intention is to discuss *church* life, not home life. The fact that the instruction concerning women and men in 2:8–15 is followed immediately by instruction concerning church offices is indicative of this more general focus of the entire letter.

“To teach” (*didaskain*). The word “teach,” from the Greek *didasko*, is in contrast with “receive instruction” in verse 11. It is best to understand the word “a man” to be the common object of both verbs, “teach” and “exercise authority over.” Thus “I do not allow a woman to teach a man” is a complete thought that is separate from “I do not allow a woman to exercise authority over a man,” as shown below.

What exactly is meant by “teach”? Rengstorf (135) says the Greeks used this word to mean “teaching” or “instructing” in the widest sense, including the imparting of information, the passing on of knowledge, and the acquiring of skills. There is also a nuance of authority, in the sense that the teacher is telling his students what they *ought* to believe or *ought* to do. This is quite different from other kinds of verbal presentations, such as personal testimonies and reports from mission fields.

Since 1 Tim 3:15 specifies that Paul is giving instructions about church life, we conclude that this prohibition applies only within the context of the church. Paul thus forbids women to teach *Christian* men in all functions of the church sanctioned by the elders, including but not limited to public worship. He is not forbidding such things as Christian mothers teaching their sons, or Christian women school teachers having male pupils. Since church life is in view, we also conclude that the prohibition is limited to teaching *Christian doctrine*, or teaching about the meaning and application of the Bible. That is, Paul is forbidding women to give authoritative instruction concerning biblical doctrine to Christian men in any kind of church function.

What about the common egalitarian contention that the teaching Paul is forbidding here is *false* teaching only? There is nothing at all in this verse or in this word to suggest that this is what Paul had

in mind. Also, such an idea raises some obvious questions. If Paul's main concern here is *false* teaching, why does he limit his prohibition only to women teaching *men*? It is just as wrong to teach false doctrine to women as to men. Also, if the main concern is false teaching, why does he prohibit only *women* from such teaching? It is just as wrong for men to teach false doctrine as for women to do it.

Thus this prohibition has nothing to do with whether the content of the teaching is true or false. Paul forbids a woman to teach a man (as defined above), period.

“To exercise authority over” (authentēin). The meaning of *authentēo* (used only here in the NT) is very controversial. One idea prevalent among egalitarians is that this word in itself has a negative connotation, i.e., that it refers to a kind of authority which in itself is sinful or wrongly seized. This view is perpetuated in some translations, including the KJV, which says “usurp authority.” Other versions use the word “domineer” (Berkeley, Williams, NEB), a practice that of course is objectionable by definition. As one egalitarian says, it means to seize autocratic, dictatorial control (Webb, 2:7).

This conclusion is drawn mainly from one of the meanings of the related noun, *authentēs*, which in ancient Greece was sometimes applied to individuals in the negative senses of “autocrat” and even “murderer.” Thus, it is concluded, if an *authentēs* is “a murderer,” then the verb *authentēo* must mean “to commit murder,” or at least to exercise violent and dictatorial control over someone. Thus Paul is forbidding women to exercise absolute power over men in a destructive manner; he is not forbidding the exercise of ordinary authority over men.

Others, however, have concluded that the verb *authentēo* does not have this negative connotation, but simply means “exercise authority over” (NASB, ESV) or “have authority over” (NKJV, NRSV, NIV), as most translations render it. In other words, it is not a kind of authority that is objectionable in itself, nor is it necessarily seized (“usurped”) in an unlawful manner.

One way to decide the meaning of this word is to examine all the times *authentēo* was used in Greek literature of any kind near

the time of the NT. This has been done H. Scott Baldwin. He has identified, examined, listed, and analyzed all the 82 relevant uses of this verb from the first century B.C. to the twelfth century A.D. (see Baldwin, “Word” and “*authenteo*”). He concludes that in every case but two, *authenteo* was used to mean legitimate authority without any kind of destructive connotation such as “domineer.” The two exceptions are one use by Chrysostom in A.D. 390, where it means something akin to “usurp authority.” The other negative sense comes from the tenth century A.D., where it was used in the sense of “murder.” But these examples are too late to help us understand what the word meant closer to the first century. The fact is that every known use of the word in NT times and for several hundred years thereafter refers not to sinful authority but to a valid, positive kind of authority.

If *authenteo* in itself meant a sinful kind of authority, why would Paul again limit his prohibition to women? It would be just as wrong for men to usurp such authority as it is for women. Also, if this were the meaning, why does Paul forbid such domineering only over *men*? Would it not be wrong to domineer over women also?

The only sound conclusion is that Paul is prohibiting women in the church to hold positions of authority over men. The apostleship was such a position; this is a reason why no woman was chosen to the office of apostle. The eldership is such a position; thus 1 Tim 2:12 prohibits women from serving as elders in the church.

“*Or*” (*oude*). This simple conjunction linking “teach” and “exercise authority” may seem insignificant, but in fact it is very important for our understanding of the verse as a whole. This is so because some think *oude* links these two verbs together in such a way that they represent just one activity, not two. The idea is that Paul is saying that it is wrong for a woman to teach men *in such a way* that she usurps authority over them. That is, as long as she is not usurping authority, it is all right for her to teach men. Thus if the elders sanction it, a woman can legitimately teach a mixed adult Bible class or even preach from the pulpit.

This view assumes two things. First, it assumes that the word *authenteo* means “usurp authority,” which we have already seen is

entirely false. Second, it assumes that the very force of the word *oude* is to link two actions together in such a way that they are inseparable, or in such a way that the one defines the other. One egalitarian has said that its English equivalent is 'n', as in such familiar phrases as "nice 'n' easy," "hot 'n' bothered," "eat 'n' run." Thus what Paul is saying is that a woman must not "teach 'n' domineer" over a man, i.e., she must not teach men in a domineering manner.

Is this the proper meaning of *oude*? The answer is no. Köstenberger's study of *oude* ("Sentence") shows that it never connects a positive activity with a negative activity, but always connects either two positive activities or two negative ones. This in itself rules out the suggestion that the two verbs, *didasko* and *authenteo*, form a single idea meaning "teach (positive) so as to usurp authority (negative)." Also, though this conjunction does connect two things or activities that are related, they always remain distinct. It is usually like our combination "neither ... nor," and sometimes it is equivalent to "not even." Its precise force in 1 Tim 2:12 is probably this: "I permit a woman *neither* to teach a man, *nor* to have authority over a man."

"But to remain quiet" (all' einai en hesuchia). *Hesuchia* does not mean "be silent" (as the NIV translates it), but to have a quiet demeanor or attitude. Apparently this was an important point for Paul, because he gives the same instruction in verse 11, "Let a woman *quietly* receive instruction." Thus Paul opens and closes this two-verse instruction to women with an emphasis on a quiet spirit. This suggests that the Ephesian women did have a problem that Paul is addressing here, namely, that they were dutifully learning Christian doctrine but were not doing so in quietness and submission (v. 11). Rather, they were seeking to use their knowledge in an improper way, i.e., in teaching and having authority over men. This would explain Paul's emphasis on a quiet, submissive attitude.

3. Practical Applications

How may these conclusions be applied to questions of church leadership today? In my judgment, only two kinds of church activities are prohibited for Christian women by 1 Tim 2:12. The

first is *teaching Christian men*, as defined above. Two notes may be added here. One, this verse does not prohibit women from teaching *non-Christian* men, e.g., in an evangelistic situation (see below). Two, exactly when a boy becomes a man is something we may never agree upon. Each body of elders should set a policy on this for their own congregations, without condemning those who disagree. The bottom line is that women are not allowed to teach in any Christian-to-Christian situation where men are in the audience. This applies especially to preaching from the pulpit, and teaching mixed adult Sunday school classes.

The second prohibited activity is *exercising authority over Christian men*. This means that women may not be elders, since this is an office of general authority in the church. This also shows why Jesus chose no women to be apostles.

It should be emphasized that the category of things *not* prohibited by 1 Tim 2:12 is *much* larger than the former. First, this text does not prohibit women from teaching in church contexts where no men are present. That is, they may teach other women (Titus 2:3–5), as well as children of both sexes. If a woman has a gift of teaching and there is not a proper context for the use of her gift, a congregation should seriously consider dividing Bible classes according to gender, thus creating more women’s classes.

Second, this text does not prohibit women from witnessing to unbelievers, men or women. Unbelievers are not a part of the “household of God” (1 Tim 3:15) and thus are not excluded by the prohibition. This means that women may participate fully in evangelism and missionary work. In Acts 18:26 Priscilla’s “teaching” of Apollos was in fact witnessing to an unbeliever (Apollos had not been baptized into Christ, Acts 18:25; see 19:1–7).

Third, this text does not prohibit women from participating in a worship service, as long as they are not teaching men or exercising authority over men. “Leading” singing is not exercising authority. Giving inspirational testimony is not teaching. Communion meditations, on the other hand, are usually a form of teaching.

Fourth, this text does not prohibit women from being involved in many positions of leadership or administration in the church,

where these do not involve teaching men and having authority over men. We should make a distinction between having authority over *people*, and administering *programs* or having responsibility over certain areas of service in the church.

Whether women can be deacons or not cannot be settled by this text. Biblically understood, the office of deacon does not involve teaching men or having authority over men; thus 1 Tim 2:12 does not apply. But a study of other texts suggests that there is no biblical precedent for women as deacons. In Rom 16:1 the use of *diakonos* for Phoebe is best understood in the generic sense of “servant” (see Cottrell, *Romans*, 2:461–464). In Acts 6:1–6 when the apostles gave instructions for choosing the seven protodeacons, they commanded that “seven men” be selected. The word for “men” is *aner*, which specifically means “males.”

Does 1 Tim 3:11 refer to deaconesses, as Thatcher (65–66) believes? The question arises in view of the fact that this verse, which appears in the middle of Paul’s list of qualifications for deacons (vv. 8,12), refers to *gynaikas* (plural for *gyne*), which can mean either “wives” or “women.” Many take this to mean the deacons’ wives; others see it as referring to women leaders, if not deacons as such then something equivalent to deacons. The latter is a possibility, but several considerations rule out including the *gynaikas* in the general category of deacons. These are as follows.

(1) The use of the word “likewise” (*hosautos*) in 1 Tim 3:8 and 3:11. In 3:8 this word introduces the deacons as a group different from the elders. Its use in 3:11 suggests that it is here introducing yet another group distinct from the deacons. (This is how the word functions in 1 Tim 2:8–9 and Titus 2:2–6.)

(2) The use of the words *semnotes* and *semnos* in this chapter. *Semnotes* is a noun meaning “gravity, dignity” and is used in 1 Tim 3:4 as a qualification for elders. *Semnos* is the equivalent adjective, meaning “grave, dignified, worthy of respect.” It is used in 3:8 as the first qualification for deacons, and is also used in 3:11 as the first qualification for the *gynaikas*. If 3:11 is giving further qualifications for women deacons, why is this adjective (*semnos*) repeated from 3:8? The fact that it and its related noun are used three times in these lists suggests that we have three groups here:

elders, deacons, and *gynaikas*.

(3) The use of “deacons” in both 3:8 and 3:12 and *gynaikas* (“women, wives”) in 3:11 pointedly distinguishes these women from the category of deacons.

(4) Those who hold that 3:11 refers specifically to women deacons usually say that 3:12 then refers specifically to men deacons. If this were the case, we would expect the word “men” in 3:12 instead of the word “deacons.”

(5) If 3:12 states qualifications for men deacons only, then it is required of both elders (3:2) and men deacons that they be “the husband of one wife.” Why would it not be equally important that the women deacons be “the wife of one husband”? Even widows who wanted church support had to meet this requirement (1 Tim 5:9). Yet it is not given as a requirement for the *gynaikas* in 3:11. This implies that the *gynaikas* are not women deacons.

(6) The use of the Greek word *gyne* (singular for *gynaikas*) in the sense of “wives” in 3:2 and 3:12 suggests that this is its meaning in 3:11 also. The reason there is no possessive (“their”) in 3:11 may be that in this verse *gynaikas* includes both the wives of the elders and the wives of the deacons.¹

¹ Cottrell, J. (2002). *The faith once for all: Bible doctrine for today* (pp. 431–440). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub.