

Women in the Pulpit?

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The question whether women may serve as pastors or elders is one that hits home for many Christians. Believers have seen this issue embroil and even divide their churches. In taking up such a critical and sensitive matter, it is important to turn to the Bible. What light does the Word of God shed on this controversial topic?

In [1 Timothy 2:8–15](#), the Apostle Paul provides the clear direction that the church needs to order its life in a way that is pleasing to God. In this letter, Paul writes to Timothy, his younger colleague in the ministry. Timothy was serving the church in Ephesus at a difficult time. He was facing problems of false teaching (1:3–11; 6:2–10) and confusion in worship (2:1–15). The church also needed clear guidance on the qualifications and task of its officers, the elders and the deacons (3:1–5:25).

After giving Timothy instructions about the work of prayer in Christian worship (2:1–7), Paul turns to give specific counsel to men and women as they participate in the public worship of God (vv. 8–15). In these verses, he addresses sins that tend to particularly plague each gender. Men must pray “without anger or quarreling” (v. 8). Women must prioritize godliness over glamour (vv. 9–10).

Paul takes up a further concern relating to women’s participation in public worship. Paul first positively outlines God’s calling to women—“let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness” (v. 11). The Apostle affirms the right of women to be present in the worship of the church and to learn, alongside the men, the Word of God as it is read and proclaimed. In this respect, female disciples of Jesus are in every way the equal of male disciples of Jesus.

Paul then forbids women “to teach or to exercise authority over a man” (v. 12). They are, rather, “to remain quiet.” Women are to occupy themselves with what God has called them to do—to be quiet learners. They are not to take up the forbidden pursuits outlined in verse 12.

What are these pursuits? Paul mentions two. The first is teaching. The context is important here. Paul does not forbid women from any and all teaching activities, even within the church. Rather, Paul forbids women from

the public preaching and teaching of the Word of God when the church is assembled in public worship. This work belongs to the elders of the church (see 3:2; 4:11–16). The second is the exercise of authority over men. In the following chapter, Paul will entrust spiritual authority to the church’s elders, qualified men who have demonstrated themselves to be competent managers of their own families (see 3:5). We may summarize Paul’s prohibition in verse 12 in this way: women are not permitted to hold the office or to exercise the functions of an elder in the church.

It is in verses 13–14 that Paul provides reasons for his instruction in verses 11–12. Paul reminds Timothy of the order in which God made Adam and Eve: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (v. 13). Paul then reminds Timothy of the way that our first parents fell into sin: “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (v. 14). Paul is not excusing Adam from responsibility for the fall. On the contrary, Adam’s sin was against the clear light of the Word of God (see [Gen. 2:15](#)). Neither is Paul saying here that Eve was a gullible person. He is simply noting the Bible’s teaching that Eve ate the forbidden fruit after she had been deceived by the serpent.

How do Paul’s words in [1Timothy 2:13–14](#) support his commands in verses 11–12? They do so in at least two ways. First, the prohibition of women from the teaching and exercise of authority described in verse 12 is rooted in the way that God made human beings (v. 13). It is, in other words, rooted in the creation. Paul’s prohibition is not unique to the situation in Ephesus; nor is it restricted to the first century. We certainly may not attribute it to the limited outlook of a first-century Jewish man. This prohibition reflects the order God established in creation for men and women.

Second, Paul’s prohibition in verse 12 finds a cautionary tale in verse 14. When Eve tried to “be like God” and disobeyed God’s Word, disaster ensued ([Gen. 3:5](#)). No good ever comes from departing from the wholesome order that God puts in place for our well-being. For that reason, Paul continues, women should not try to pursue what God has forbidden them. They should commit themselves to what God has called them to do. God calls most women (but not all women) to marriage and childbearing ([1Tim. 2:15](#)). When a believing woman embraces this vocation with “faith and love and holiness, with self-control,” then she may find assurance of the salvation that God has freely given her in Christ.

We need Paul's words in the church today. They show us the order or pattern that God has set down for men and women in His church. They impress on us the danger of deviating from that order. But they do not merely lay down negatives for the church. They present a winning vision of what God has called women to be and to do. In an age that often demeaned women as the intellectual and moral inferiors of men, Paul told Timothy that women, no less than men, have a right to be learners in the school of Christ (2:11). They are to adorn themselves in godliness—not only when they gather weekly with the church for worship (v. 9) but also in the day-to-day grind of caring for their children (v. 15). It is in the quiet and ordinary scenes of life that God is pleased to work out His extraordinary purposes of grace. And that is good news for all God's people in every age.

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