

# Revisiting the Clarity of Scripture in 1 Timothy 2:12<sup>1</sup>

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First Timothy 2:12 has played a defining role in the Christian debate about the role of women in ministry, especially in American evangelicalism. The text appears to forbid some kind of behavior involving women teaching men. For that reason, exegetical studies about this verse have been numerous and exhaustive.<sup>2</sup>

But there is an important aspect of the debate that continues to be overlooked, and it relates to a broader principle of theological interpretation and hermeneutics. The principle is typically related to “the clarity of Scripture” (or “perspicuity of Scripture”) and can be summarized in the words of one Reformed confession: “when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture . . . it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”<sup>3</sup>

As it will be demonstrated, this principle is common in the history of Christianity and tends to be accepted by both “complementarians” and “egalitarians.”<sup>4</sup> The question is whether both groups equally apply the principle, especially when it comes to key texts surrounding women in ministry.

As it will be argued, those who forbid women pastors on the basis of 1 Tim 2:12 illegitimately give the passage the weight of a “clear” text while ignoring the implications of its notorious difficulties. This case will be made analytically by:

First defining the features of a “plain,” “straightforward,” and “clear” passage and an “obscure,” “difficult,” and “less clear” passage.

Second, confirming that 1 Tim 2:9–15 is in the latter category for five reasons:

1. The meaning of 1 Tim 2:9–15 has been and is still highly disputed.
2. 1 Tim 2:9–15 does not make sense according to a literal, “straightforward reading” of the text, and therefore requires greater exegetical treatment.
3. 1 Tim 2:9–15 contains an unusual number of obscure terms.
4. 1 Tim 2:9–15 has produced an unusually large number of diverse interpretations—regardless of one’s position about women in ministry.
5. 1 Tim 2:9–15 has been particularly difficult to apply, especially for those who reject the legitimacy of women pastors.

Third, confirming that both sides of the debate generally uphold the “obscure-in-light-of-clear” principle.

Finally, confirming that those who forbid women pastors tend *not* to uphold the above principle (3) regarding 1 Tim 2:9–15, but those who allow women pastors *do* tend to uphold it.

## Premise 1: Clarifying the Clarity of Scripture

The doctrine of the “clarity” or “perspicuity” of Scripture largely originates from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformation. Martin Luther’s German translation of the Bible and the Catholic Church’s condemnation of such activities led to the question of who exactly should be reading the Scriptures and who was capable of understanding them. Can the average Christian study the Bible, or does the Pope have a monopoly on scriptural interpretation?

These questions naturally led to a debate about the nature of the Scriptures themselves.

This debate was actuated in the written interactions between Luther and Desiderius Erasmus. Despite his critical anthropology, Luther was remarkably optimistic about the common person’s ability to understand the Bible. In fact, he denied any objective obscurities in the Scriptures and attributed them to human “ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar,” even saying that “[some difficult texts] are not meant to be obscure or to stay obscure.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Erasmus saw parts of the Bible as intentionally (and therefore permanently) difficult: “There are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes, by which means we are led to acknowledge the unsearchable majesty of the divine wisdom, and the weakness of the human mind.”<sup>6</sup> When the dust between Luther and Erasmus had finally settled, William Whitaker attempted to define what the Protestants really meant by the “clarity of Scripture”: “our fundamental principles are these: First, that the Scriptures are sufficiently clear to admit of their being read by the people and the unlearned with some fruit and utility. Secondly, that all things necessary for salvation are propounded in plain words in the Scriptures.”<sup>7</sup> This definition was noticeably milder than Luther’s view.

From the Reformation onward, the clarity of Scripture in Protestant Christianity retained this basic sense, though, like so many doctrines, weaved back and forth between extremes, and eventually obtained meanings distant from the original(s). One can find these doctrinal varieties and revisions in contemporary literature.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, it has always (at least since 2 Pet 3:16) been acknowledged that there are “difficult” passages in the Bible, though the nature of these has generally not been resolved. A second point of interest is that such difficulties and obscurities are, on some level, subjective, and naturally emerge from communities. In the case of Scripture’s clarity, “difficult” passages would generally refer to the Christian community. So, for example, when the *Westminster Confession* says, “all things in Scripture are . . . not alike clear unto all,”<sup>9</sup> it is, by default, speaking of what is unclear to the believing community.<sup>10</sup> This both helps and challenges the search for what Christians believe is “unclear.”

Third—and this is the most important point for the purposes of this article—Christians quickly devised a way of learning how to deal with hard passages when reading Scripture and doing theology: readers should read the more difficult in light of the less difficult. In other words, *start with what is not highly disputed*. The first reference to this idea may have come from Tertullian, the second-century Latin apologist. In his apologetic discussion of the resurrection, he wrote that “uncertain statements should be determined by certain ones, and obscure ones by such as are clear and plain.”<sup>11</sup>

Note that this principle does *not* suggest that the Christian should only pay attention to one set of texts and ignore the others.

It is not, to quote the editors of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, “a principle that says, if a text is disputed, don’t use it.”<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is a principle that guides decisions about how weight should be given in Christian theology and life. Irenaeus addressed the same concern in similar terms,<sup>13</sup> and one can find this hermeneutical principle from early Christianity<sup>14</sup> to the Reformation to the present day.<sup>15</sup>

This principle has operated for over a thousand years without a conscious awareness and consensus of what exactly qualifies as “obscure” or “difficult.” While some (e.g., Luther and Erasmus) addressed the criteria of what makes up the “difficult” passages, this is the exception and not the norm.

After researching the literature on this subject—and also realizing the constraints of space—I want simply to offer five criteria that indicate when a text may properly be considered “difficult” (“less clear,” “obscure”):

1. The meaning of the text has been (and may still be) highly disputed.
2. The text does not make sense according to a literal, “straightforward,” or “face value” reading.
3. The text contains an unusual number of obscure terms.
4. The text has produced a large number of diverse interpretations.
5. The text, if applicable and appropriate, is particularly difficult to apply in concrete, contemporary situations.

Many readers will undoubtedly take issue with this list, and time and space does not allow for a full elaboration, much less a defense, of each criterion. These five will suffice for the purposes of this article. The main, unsophisticated application of these criteria is that if a passage meets several criteria—and especially *all five*—it is legitimate and reasonable for the reading community (whether church or academy) to consider it a genuinely “difficult” passage.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, it would be absurd to suggest that such a passage should be treated as “clear teaching”—for the obvious reason that it is not. The task now is to see where 1 Tim 2:12 and its immediate context (2:9–15) comes down in light of these five criteria.

**Premise 2: Why 1 Timothy 2:9–15 Is Genuinely Difficult**

The first item to address is whether the meaning of 1 Tim 2:9–15 has been and is disputed. This appears rather easy to answer. It seems fair to say that all sides of the debate can agree that the meaning of the text is highly disputed (i.e., much more disputed than the majority of other Scriptural texts) and has been for some time (at least a half-century). A cursory review of the literature reveals this much alone. Craig Blomberg speaks on behalf of the evangelical

academic community when he calls 1 Tim 2:12 perhaps “the single most scrutinized verse of Scripture in recent scholarship.”<sup>17</sup>

The second question is whether 1 Tim 2:9–15 makes sense according to a literal, straightforward reading of the text. Sarah Sumner masterfully answers with an unequivocal “no,” arguing at length that this passage “cannot sensibly be taken at face value,” and many other commentators would concur.<sup>18</sup>

The third question is, does 1 Tim 2:9–15 contain an unusual number of obscure terms? This, too, is not difficult to answer. Paul uses several words in 1 Tim 2:9–15 used only once in the NT (*hapax legomena*). Not only that, but Paul’s frequency of these odd terms is unusually high, as Table 1 demonstrates:<sup>19</sup>

It should also be noted that the meaning of the specific *hapax authenteō* in 1 Tim 2:12 greatly affects the meaning of the passage, and this term is rare *outside* of biblical literature.<sup>20</sup> The immediate context of 1 Tim 2:12, then, *does* use obscure terms unusually often—at least when compared with the rest of the Pastoral Letters, Paul’s letters, and the NT.

Fourth and fifth, has 1 Tim 2:9–15 produced an unusually large number of diverse interpretations and applications? Most definitely. Below is a handful of recent interpretations of verse 12 alone, organized according to both author and view:

1. Douglas Moo: “Is Paul prohibiting women from all teaching? We do not think so. . . . He allows women to teach other women (Titus 2:3–4), but prohibits them to teach men. . . . Clearly, then, Paul’s prohibition of women’s having authority over a man would exclude a woman from becoming an elder in the way this office is described in the pastoral epistles.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Moo provides the interpretation that Paul is making universal prohibition of women teaching (anything) and exercising authority (of any kind) over (any) man at church. By extension, this precludes women from being pastors, since it is (typically considered) their task to teach and exercise authority over all of the church congregation. What is meant by “in church” or “at church” is not clear.
2. Thomas Schreiner (A): “If our interpretation of passages like 1 Timothy 2:11–15 is correct, then women cannot publicly exercise their spiritual gift of teaching over men.”<sup>22</sup> Schreiner’s view is virtually the same as Moo’s above, although he adds the qualifier “publicly.” This is probably intended to add clarity, but it is doubtful whether this is exegetically warranted, especially since the distinction between “public church” and “private church” was not so cut and dried in either the early church in general or in 1 Timothy’s instruction.<sup>23</sup>
3. Schreiner (B): A few pages later, this interpretation slightly changes: “1 Timothy 2:11–15 prohibits only authoritative teaching to

TABLE 1

	NT	Pauline	Pastorals	1 Tim	1 Tim 2	1 Tim 2:9–15
# of words	138,014	32,407	3,488	1591	104	82
% of NT	100	23.5	2.5	1	< 1	< 1
# of hapaxes	1,672	528	138	65	8	6
hapaxes/word	1/83	1/61.4	1/25.3	1/24.5	1/13	1/13.6
% hapaxes	1.2	1.6	4	4	7.7	7.3

a group of Christians within the church, not evangelism to those outside the church.”<sup>24</sup> Here, Schreiner excludes the “publicly” qualifier and delineates the type of teaching (“authoritative”) and the context (“group of Christians within the church”)—suggesting that women church planters are morally acceptable but, “as soon as [the church] is established” “men should assume leadership roles in the governance and teaching ministry.”<sup>25</sup> This is an intriguing assertion for a complementarian to make since, in that case, women are doing the “initiating” and men are doing the “nurturing”—reversing the supposedly permanent, God-ordained roles of men and women.<sup>26</sup>

4. Dorothy Patterson: Patterson also mentions teaching to a “group,” although she insists that “the reference here is probably to the teaching of a *group* of men.”<sup>27</sup> Theoretically, if a particular Sunday morning service had a low attendance of fourteen women and one man, a female teacher would be acceptable since she would only be teaching and exercising authority over a single man (and not a “group of men”).

5. Ray Van Neste: “Women are not permitted to publicly teach Scripture and/or Christian doctrine to men in church (the context implies these topics).”<sup>28</sup> This is the view of the *ESV Study Bible* (edited by Wayne Grudem). It is suggested that what Paul is really addressing is *only certain kinds of teaching*: (a) public teaching, and (b) doctrinal teaching. The addition of these two qualifiers was probably meant to soften the universal ban by making it narrower in scope.<sup>29</sup> There are other complementarian perspectives that vary from this view, suggesting that the verse is only forbidding “public” teaching (and *all* teaching), while others say it is only forbidding “doctrinal” teaching (whether public or private). Other views insert different qualifiers altogether (see below).

6. Stephen Clark/D. A. Carson: “[1 Tim 2:12] reserves to men the kind of teaching which is an exercise of authority over men or over the community as a whole. However, there remain serious questions of application.”<sup>30</sup> Like Schreiner’s second position, Clark is qualifying the type of teaching by saying it is a kind that exercises authority. This is essentially the same perspective as Carson, who says, “a strong case can be made for the view that Paul refused to permit any woman to enjoy a church-recognized teaching authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11ff.)”<sup>31</sup> Carson adds the qualifier “church-recognized” (which Piper and Grudem have occasionally added at times as well)<sup>32</sup> and speaks of a “teaching authority,” so that, like Clark’s view, “teaching” modifies “authority.” It is not clear what this means; complementarians disagree over what makes some teaching authoritative and other teaching non-authoritative (e.g., the office? Content? Personal qualifications? Church context?). But what is clear is that this view differs from Köstenberger and others who forcefully argue that “teaching” and “authority” are to be kept separate;<sup>33</sup> the type of authority is *not* necessarily a *teaching-kind* of authority.<sup>34</sup> It is also not clear what Carson means by “church-recognized” (given a title? Approved for a position by the elder board, the congregation, or male leaders in the church, or a combination of these?).<sup>35</sup>

7. John Frame/Blomberg: “As unofficial teachers, women have as much right and obligation as anybody to edify their fellow believers, whether men, women, or children. . . . She is not forbidden to teach, or even to teach men; she is only forbidden to occupy the

special office [in 1 Tim 2:12]. . . . May she stand behind the pulpit as she exhorts the congregation from the Word of God? Scripture does not forbid that.”<sup>36</sup> Frame, like J. I. Packer, Grudem, and Moo, is a member of CBMW and an original signer of the Danvers Statement. He asserts in his *Doctrine of the Christian Life* that all that Paul is really doing is banning women from the office of pastor, not necessarily from the function of pastor. This is also the view of Blomberg: “the only thing Paul is prohibiting women from doing in that verse is occupying the office of overseer or elder. . . . When one recognizes the biblical restrictions on women exclusively to involve an *office* (or specific position or role), it becomes clear there are no *tasks* or ministry gifts they cannot or should not exercise—including preaching, teaching, evangelizing, pastoring, and so on.”<sup>37</sup>

Other members of CBMW (and others who are against women elders and are not CBMW members) openly challenge this specific position, suggesting that Paul may *not* be addressing the eldership. For example, Andreas Köstenberger says, “Reducing the issue solely to that of ‘no women elders/overseers,’ may be unduly minimalistic. . . . 1 Timothy 2:12 is grounded in more foundational realities than a mere surface prohibition of women occupying a given office.” Additionally, Robert Saucy writes, “It is probably impossible to be dogmatic in limiting Paul’s prohibition to a certain office holder.” George Knight III, likewise, says, “It is thus the activity that [Paul] prohibits, not just the office (cf. again 1 Cor. 14:34, 35).” James R. White, in his discussion of 1 Tim 2, says, “Paul is not in this text even addressing the issue of the eldership.”<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the largest irony regarding Frame’s position is that the 2006 preface of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, a book in which he writes on gender roles, openly denounces his view: “Some conservative evangelicals . . . say that as long as women are not ordained to the pastorate, or maybe to eldership, Scripture is being obeyed.”<sup>39</sup> (Who would have thought that “some conservative evangelicals” included contributors to the volume being introduced!)

8. Harold Hoehner: “A woman, then, may have the gift of pastor-teacher, apostle, evangelist, and prophetess (as Philip’s four daughters—Acts 21:9), while, scripturally speaking, she cannot hold the office of an elder or bishop. . . . Therefore, a church may feel free to ordain a woman in recognition of her gift or gifts with a clear understanding that her ordination is not a recognition of office.”<sup>40</sup> This perspective by Hoehner is almost identical to Blomberg and Frame’s view (above). But the argument is based on slightly different premises (regarding gift/office distinction) and has slightly different results (e.g., approving of some form of ordination).

9. Derek Morphew: “This passage does not prohibit women from ever doing public teaching. . . . The passage is therefore drawing the line on a takeover of church government by women.”<sup>41</sup> Morphew then elaborates this conclusion in a footnote: “a women-only and women-dominated church leadership is prohibited by Scripture (as per the local heresy). This does not mean that women, in the team with men, is prohibited by Scripture or that a woman cannot lead a local church.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, Morphew’s interpretation is that women pastors are allowed—just not a *majority* of them in the local church.

Morphew’s position, then, is essentially the inverse of Patterson’s position: a majority of women on the top of the



pyramid is unacceptable (Morphew) instead of a majority of men at the bottom of the pyramid being unacceptable (Patterson). In both cases, there is a desire to retain either a female minority or a male majority.

Keep in mind that the above survey is only a partial list of contemporary non-egalitarian interpretations of verse 12—that is, a subset of a subset within American evangelical scholarship (which is, one must be reminded, also a subset of a subset of the ecumenical, global Christian faith).

Egalitarian interpretations of this verse are no less varied. Some egalitarians believe that Paul was addressing false teaching, others the particular behavior of certain women in classroom kind of settings, others the status of uneducated women, and so on. It is difficult to say whether one side of the debate has offered more interpretational unity than the other. But it is *not* difficult to say that there are an unusually large number of diverse interpretations of 1 Tim 2:12—irrespective of one’s position regarding women in ministry.

### Premise 3: Reading the Obscure in Light of the Clear

It is important for my argument to establish that the “obscure-in-light-of-clear” principle is held by both those evangelicals who forbid women pastors and those who do not. Let us then turn first to complementarian scholars. Packer summarizes the principle in the following way: “What appears to be secondary, incidental, and obscure in Scripture should be viewed in the light of what appears to be primary, central, and plain.” Common seminary textbooks, such as *Let the Reader Understand*, echo the same idea: “In general, any interpretation begins life as a hypothesis that accepts some things which appear to be clear, and then proceeds to build on that base.” Complementarians Köstenberger and Richard Patterson make the same point in their hermeneutics textbook *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*: “In building a theology, we must go to those passages that clearly touch on the issue and avoid drawing principles from obscure passages.” Apologist James R. White makes essentially the same assertion, ending with the statement, “That is how biblical exegesis is done.” Schreiner also concurs, saying, “[Egalitarians] say that clear texts must have sovereignty over unclear ones. Who could possibly disagree with this hermeneutical principle when it is abstractly stated? I also believe clear texts should have priority.”<sup>43</sup>

As Schreiner indicates, Christian egalitarians agree to the same principle. To briefly survey a handful of earlier works, in the 1986 publication *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, Robert Johnston provides eleven rules of Bible interpretation, and the eighth is that “insight into texts that are obscure must be gained from those that are plain.” Along the same lines, Rebecca Groothuis writes, “Unclear and/or isolated passages are not to be used as doctrinal cornerstones, but are to be interpreted in light of clear passages which reflect overall biblical themes.” Gretchen Gaebelein Hull asserts the same in her book *Equal to Serve*.<sup>44</sup> In my role as a blind peer-reviewer of *Priscilla Papers*, I can say that the principle is a common assumption undergirding the vast majority of submissions—all of which, by default, come from an evangelical feminist perspective.

Both complementarians and egalitarians, then, tend to be on the “same page” with regard to the hermeneutical principle that

advises interpreters to seek out and give the most weight to the least obscure passages.

### Premise 4: 1 Timothy 2 in Light of the Clear

Having established the previous premises of the argument, it is now time to see how the “obscure-in-light-of-clear” principle is upheld or compromised when dealing with 1 Tim 2:12.

As it turns out, many scholars against women pastors do not concede that 1 Tim 2:12 is a difficult text. In fact, against substantial evidence to the contrary, it is actually asserted that the text is one of clearest verses on the subject of women in ministry and should govern Christians’ interpretation of all the others.

The following advice comes from Moo’s essay on 1 Tim 2:12: “We must be very careful about allowing any specific reconstruction—tentative and uncertain as it must be—to play too large a role in our exegesis.” Yet, Schreiner (in the same volume) cites 1 Tim 2:11–15 as “the clear teaching of Paul” that “must be the guide for understanding the role of women.”<sup>45</sup> Still within the same volume, Knight follows Schreiner when he declares that 1 Tim 2:12 is “the clearest” apostolic teaching that “insists on men being the primary leaders in the church (just as in marriage).”<sup>46</sup> Thus, for many key authors of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 1 Tim 2:12 does not just lack difficulties, and it is not even ordinarily clear; rather, it is the (or one of the) *clearest* (superlative) passages for the entire discussion about women and ministry.

Similar to Schreiner and Knight, Susan Foh says 1 Tim 2:12–14 is “a relatively clear command.”<sup>47</sup> Clark explicitly denies the possibility of the passage being unclear: “The difficulty in applying the passage does *not* arise from an unclarity in the meaning of the passage.”<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Alexander Strauch finds the verse so clear that he makes the following remark in his book *Biblical Eldership*: “First Timothy 2:11–14 should alone settle the question of women elders.”<sup>49</sup> And finally, White says on 1 Tim 2:12, “The text, then seems to be quite clear in its meaning.”<sup>50</sup>

Given the analysis above, these exegetical claims should be viewed as incredible. First Timothy 2:12 bears all of the marks of a non-“clear” passage (at least the five marks stated in this article), yet it is hailed as the very “guide for understanding the role of women,” as the “clearest” of all on the matter, and as the final authority. The reasons this is the case are not explicit, but one can only assume it has to do with the perceived utility of the verse in the case against women pastors. That is, an unclear 1 Tim 2:12 is of no use to those wishing to wield the text in a larger, more comprehensive theological argument in support of a complementarian position.

Without such an “ax to grind,” Christian egalitarians are naturally more sensitive to the difficulties of 1 Tim 2:12 and recognize its obscurity, resulting in a more consistent hermeneutic. For example, in response to Foh’s comments (above), Walter Liefeld says, “We must sometimes ask, however, whether one passage may *seem less* clear only because we need more information from context or background circumstances and whether another passage may *seem more* clear only because it contains apparently transparent words or phrases that in actuality do not mean what they seem to on the surface.”<sup>51</sup> Additionally, Groothuis writes,

It is important to maintain interpretive consistency with the rest of a biblical author’s writings as well as the whole

of Scripture. Toward this end, unclear and/or isolated passages are not to be used as doctrinal cornerstones, but are to be interpreted in light of clear passages which reflect overall biblical themes. This hermeneutical principle prohibits building a doctrine of female subordination on 1 Corinthians 11:3–16 and 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15, for these texts are rife with exegetical difficulties.<sup>52</sup>

In each of their writings, Johnston and Hull refer to the principle of hermeneutics that says the clearer texts should interpret the obscure, citing 1 Tim 2:12 as an example.<sup>53</sup> In his discussion on 1 Timothy 2, Ronald Pierce says, “Caution should be used when applying conclusions drawn from the specific data that are not as clear instead of from the clearer concerns of the text.”<sup>54</sup> Roger Nicole rightly concludes one of his essays by saying, “The suggestion that the passage is perfectly plain and admits no other interpretation than that it disqualifies women for the office of elder or pastor is simply not acceptable.”<sup>55</sup> (He then provides eight specific difficulties in dealing with 1 Timothy 2.)

### Confronting the Inconsistency

There appears, then, to be a double-standard of hermeneutics when it comes to critics of women pastors and 1 Tim 2. It is asserted that Christians should interpret the obscure texts in light of the clear texts, but, against the evidence (and typically, for no stated reason), 1 Tim 2:12 does not count as an obscure text.

Some complementarians appear aware of this inconsistency and so attempt to legitimize their position. Grudem, for example, dedicates a section to this topic in *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*.<sup>56</sup> He frames the “egalitarian claim” in the following way:

We should follow the main teachings of Scripture when they appear to conflict with the incidental teachings. On this issue, we must interpret the few isolated, obscure passages of Scripture that appear to restrict women’s ministry in light of the many clear passages that open all ministry roles to both men and women.<sup>57</sup>

As it should be clear, this is not quite the argument.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, at the heart of this summary is the basic assertion that the obscure passages of Scripture should be read in light of the clearer, and the obscure ones include the prohibition passages (e.g., 1 Tim 2:12). At least that much Grudem has properly identified as a real Christian egalitarian argument. Let us, then, assess his brief evaluation:

- Answer 9.7a: The Bible has to say something only once for it to be true and God’s Word for us. . . .
- Answer 9.7b: The passages that prohibit women from being elders and from teaching or having authority over men in the assembled church are not isolated passages. They occur in the heart of the main New Testament teachings about church office and about conduct in public worship. . . .
- Answer 9.7c: The restriction of some church leadership functions to men is not based on just one or two passages, but on a consistent pattern of God’s approval of male leadership throughout the Bible. . . .
- Answer 9.7d: The passages that restrict some church leadership functions to men have not been thought to be obscure or difficult to understand by the vast majority of

the church throughout its history. Obscurity in this case is not in the text of Scripture but in the eye of the beholder. . . .

- Answer 9.7e: By contrast, egalitarian claims that all church leadership roles should be open to women are not based on any direct teaching of Scripture but on doubtful inferences from passages where this topic is not even under discussion.<sup>59</sup>

Notice the absence of any affirmation that 1 Tim 2:12 is a difficult, unclear passage according to *any* criteria. The notorious difficulties of the text—the same ones that have generated a flurry of technical articles and that number (according to Nicole) up to *eight substantial* difficulties—are not even acknowledged. There is only a brief denial that the prohibition passages (presumably 1 Tim 2:12 and 1 Cor 14:34–35) are “isolated.” However, there is obviously no argument there; all parties can agree that the texts should not be thought of as “isolated” if this simply means that they are found in places where interpreters would not expect them.<sup>60</sup> Being “isolated” was not one of the criteria for obscurity provided above, nor is it typical for egalitarians to claim that the prohibition passages are.

Another straw argument appears in answer 9.7d: “Obscurity in this case is not in the text of Scripture but in the eye of the beholder.” As it has been observed above, Christian egalitarians generally agree. They do not deny the clarity of Scripture and its communal, subjective nature; they simply disagree on what passages are truly “obscure” to the church and which ones are not.

As far as I can tell, then, the only relevant and substantive argument Grudem has to offer in this section is that the prohibition passages were not considered obscure throughout church history, so (presumably) they should not be thought of as obscure today.

However, this may or may not be the case—again depending on what is considered “obscure” and what is meant by “church history.” For instance, many of the criteria provided above transcend contemporary observation (e.g., the number of rare terms in the biblical text, which generally do not change)<sup>61</sup> Some of these important aspects of interpreting the text may also go unnoticed by the church (the church has yet to exhaust the Scriptures!). It is possible, in other words, for Christians to be completely *unaware* of the difficulty and oddity of certain verses—perhaps even for centuries, or longer.<sup>62</sup> In that case, pointing to the interpretation of the historical church is largely irrelevant in evaluating the difficulty and obscurity of certain texts. Computers were “simple” machines when I was a toddler. Push a button, it lights up, and now I can play games. But after years of maturing, it became clear just how complicated computers really are—both to effectively use and to understand. My earlier claim of computers being “simple” only indicated my ignorance—not my faithfulness to orthodox computer science.

The church (like any social organism) is no different. Concepts and texts that were for decades considered “simple” and easy to understand and interpret were later shown to be far more complex. Contrary to what Grudem and others might contend, embracing this complexity is not a step away from the truth, but a step *towards* it.<sup>63</sup> Until Christians encounter certain challenges in their own lives, they lack a collective reason to spend so much energy digging into texts of a certain topic. When they do, entire frameworks may shift.<sup>64</sup>

Even if the passages were not genuinely obscure to most Christians in history, this does not address the more pressing concern—the obscurity and difficulties that exist *today* and in recent decades.<sup>65</sup> After all, it is the *current* “disintegration” and “megashift . . . to a pagan worldview” that complementarians are explicitly responding to in the first place.<sup>66</sup> In his discussion, Grudem appears to be either unaware or unconcerned about most or all of these issues. He cites Daniel Doriani as saying, “Throughout the ages the church has traditionally interpreted 1 Timothy 2:11–12 in a straightforward manner,” and then adds, “But suddenly, with the advent of modern feminism, many scholars have decided that these texts are obscure. Why has this happened? The texts did not change.”<sup>67</sup> It is as if one would prefer non-obscure passages and potentially erroneous interpretations of them than obscure passages with multiple possible interpretations; potentially erroneous certainty is considered more desirable than ambiguity.<sup>68</sup> To the contrary, it is far more feasible to contend that the fact that some Scriptures becoming obscure over the ages is only detrimental if the passages have been properly interpreted and embodied. In that case, the truth is genuinely being blurred. But if the historical church *has* missed the right meaning (and/or embodiment) of the text all along (which can and does happen—perhaps more often than Christians like to admit), then a period of obscurity may be a step in the right direction—towards a right meaning of the text.<sup>69</sup> As C. S. Lewis once remarked, “We all want progress, but if you’re on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, at times, having *no* position on a particular verse is better than having a potentially *erroneous* position. Perceived clarity and purported certainty simply are not indicators of truth.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, it should also be noted that answer 9.7e is highly debatable. The direct implications of Acts 2, James 2:1–8, and Gal 3:28 is that there is no discrimination in the church (sexual, racial, etc.), and since forbidding women from being pastors *solely because of their sex* is precisely that (sexual discrimination), it can easily be argued that the “egalitarian claims that all church leadership roles should be open to women” *are*, in fact, “based on [the] direct teaching of Scripture.”<sup>72</sup> But that is another debate entirely.

## VII. Conclusion

The last twenty-five years of academic scholarship vindicate the claim that in 1 Tim 2:12, “It isn’t even entirely clear what Paul was prohibiting.”<sup>73</sup> This is demonstrated by the expansive variety of interpretations and applications of the texts by multiple sides of theological interest, not to mention the sheer attention the verse has taken in NT biblical studies and the women-in-ministry debate.<sup>74</sup> While it is comforting to know that both complementarians and egalitarians hold to the “obscure-in-light-of-clear” hermeneutical principle, it is disheartening to see that principle being compromised when it comes to complementarian treatments and attitudes surrounding 1 Tim 2:12. If basic rules of hermeneutics can be so easily set aside when it is theologically convenient, upon what grounds do such concessions stop? Only time can answer this question.

What is clear, however, is that interpreters ought to do whatever is necessary to “hear the text” insofar as it is possible for limited

human beings to do so. That inevitably involves setting aside the “apologetic value” of a certain approach or interpretation—even if that means letting go of perhaps the most common weapon wielded against women pastors.

## Notes

1. This article was first published in the *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 59, no. 1 (March 2016): 99–117. It is reprinted here with kind permission from the editor of *JETS*, Andreas Köstenberger. Apart from minor stylistic changes, the main difference is that the *Priscilla Papers* version has shortened many of the quotations; see also endnote 5.

2. See the references listed in Jamin Hübner, “Revisiting αὐθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *JSPL* 4, no. 1 (2015): 41–70.

3. *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.7; 1.9.

4. For a full delineation of these terms as they function in American evangelicalism, see *The Danvers Statement* (1988) and the *CBE Statement on Equality* (1989).

5. Martin Luther, cited in Mark Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 147. Please note that this section on the Reformation has been shortened from the *JETS* version of the article.

6. Erasmus, cited in Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 144.

7. Whitaker, cited in Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 153.

8. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 108; John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010), 205–7; Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*; James Patrick Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), chap. 14; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 1:475–481; Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 87–88; Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1:67.

9. *WCF* 1.7. Lest one think that this statement only represents a small strand of the Christian community, Jacob Arminius in *On the Perspicuity of Scripture*, Disputation 8.3, also agrees.

10. Although it could be debated that the *Confession* is only speaking of the community who holds to the *Confession*, which in that case would be a narrower subset of Protestant Christianity (e.g., what is obscure for the Pentecostal may be clear to the Presbyterian).

11. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 21, in *ANF* 3:569, cited in Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 122.

12. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “An Overview of Central Concerns,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 90.

13. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.10.1, in *ANF* 1:370, cited in Allison, *Historical Theology*, 122: “No question can be solved by another which itself awaits solution. Nor . . . can an ambiguity be explained by means of another ambiguity. . . . But things of this kind receive their solution from those which are manifest, consistent, and clear.”

14. See Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 186. Cf. Thompson, *Clear and Present Word*, 137.

15. See examples below of complementarians and egalitarians on this issue.

16. Conversely, passages that do not fulfill these five criteria would (theoretically) be considered “clear.”

17. Craig Blomberg, “Women in Ministry: A Complementarian Perspective,” in *Two Views of Women in Ministry*, ed. James Beck, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 168.

18. Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 210–12. Cf. Roger Nicole, “Biblical Authority & Feminist



Aspirations,” in *Women, Authority & the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 47–48.

19. The table comes from Hübner, “Revisiting αὐθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12,” 41–70.

20. See Hübner, “Revisiting αὐθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12”; idem, “Translating αὐθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 2 (2015): 16–26.

21. Douglas Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11–15,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 186–87.

22. Thomas Schreiner, “The Valuable Ministries of Women in the Context of Male Leadership: A Survey of Old and New Testament Examples and Teaching,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 218.

23. See Joel Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds., *The World of the NT* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) and Karen Jo Torjessen, *When Women Were Priests* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 82.

24. Schreiner, “Valuable Ministries of Women,” 223.

25. Schreiner, “Valuable Ministries of Women,” 223.

26. See John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 30–37. The term “initiate” or “initiative” appears fifty-two times in the volume, an average of about once every nine pages.

27. Dorothy Patterson, “What Should a Woman Do in the Church? One Woman’s Personal Reflections,” in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, ed. Andreas Köstenberger and Thomas Schreiner, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 162 (italics hers).

28. Ray Van Neste, study notes for 1 Timothy, in *The ESV Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2328.

29. Note Denny Burk’s comment: “Many Complementarians continue to disagree concerning how this principle of ‘headship’ should be observed within the church. . . . To some extent, I’m sure the disagreement is probably driven by pragmatic considerations. But to some degree, the disagreement is also due to conflicting interpretations of the Bible, especially 1 Timothy 2:12.” Denny Burk, “Biblical Patriarchy and 1 Timothy 2:12” (September 21, 2006); online: <http://www.dennyburk.com/biblical-patriarchy-and-1-timothy-212>.

30. Stephen Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (1980; repr., East Lansing: Tabor House, 2006), 139.

31. D. A. Carson, “‘Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 143. Cf. D. A. Carson, “The Flow of Thought in 1 Timothy 2” (Lecture, Different by Design Conference, Minneapolis, February 2, 2009).

32. See Piper and Grudem, “Overview,” 85.

33. Andreas Köstenberger, “The Syntax of 1 Timothy 2:12: A Rejoinder to Philip B. Payne,” *JBMW* 14, no. 2 (2009): 37–40.

34. Carson and Clark’s view also differs from that of Robert Saucy, who appears to sharply distinguish between the authority a person has by virtue of what they say (divine truth) and the authority a person has by virtue of being the person that they are. See Saucy, “The Ministry of Women in the Early Church,” in *Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective*, ed. Robert Saucy and Judith TenElshof (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 167.

35. Cf. Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 228.

36. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010), 639.

37. Blomberg, “Women in Ministry: A Complementarian Perspective,” 170, 182.

38. Andreas Köstenberger, “‘Teaching and Usurping Authority: I Timothy 2:11–15’ (Ch 12) by Linda Belleville,” *JBMW* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 49; Robert Saucy, “Paul’s Teaching on the Ministry of Women,” in *Women and Men in Ministry*, 307; George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*,

*NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 142; James R. White, *Pulpit Crimes: The Criminal Mishandling of God’s Word* (Homewood: Solid Ground Christian Books), 116.

39. J. Ligon Duncan and Randy Stinson, “Preface (2006),” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ix.

40. Harold Hoehner, “Can a Woman Be a Pastor-Teacher?” *JETS* 50 (2007): 769, 771.

41. Derek Morphey, *Different but Equal: Going Beyond the Complementarian/Egalitarian Debate* (Cape Town: Vineyard International, 2009), 127.

42. Morphey, *Different but Equal*, 127n47.

43. J. I. Packer, “Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 350; Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 1st ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 170; Andreas Köstenberger and Richard Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 493; James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur’an* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2013), 153; Thomas Schreiner, “Women in Ministry: Another Complementarian Perspective,” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 269.

44. Robert Johnston, “Biblical Authority and Interpretation,” in *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 31; Rebecca Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 113; Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men Working Together Revealing the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 188–89.

45. Schreiner, “Valuable Ministries,” 218. Cf. p. 221: “some scholars contend that lack of clarity is also a problem in texts like 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15 . . . although they have their difficulties, [they] contain a sustained argument, and the basic thrust of the passages is clear”; idem, “Women in Ministry: Another Complementarian Perspective,” 269: “My own position is that the main point in . . . the texts that limit the role of women is clear.”

46. Knight, “The Family and the Church: How Should Biblical Manhood and Womanhood Work Out in Practice?” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 352.

47. Susan T. Foh, “A Male Leadership View: The Head of the Woman Is the Man,” in *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, ed. Bonnidell Clouse and Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 103n11.

48. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 139 (italics mine).

49. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 59.

50. White, *Pulpit Crimes*, 117.

51. Walter L. Liefeld, “A Plural Ministry Response [to Susan T. Foh],” in *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, 113–14.

52. Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict*, 113.

53. Johnston, “Biblical Authority and Interpretation,” 31; Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 184–87.

54. Ronald Pierce, “Evangelicals and Gender Roles in the 1990s: 1 Tim 2:8–15: A Test Case,” *JETS* 36 (1993): 345.

55. Nicole, “Biblical Authority and Feminist Aspirations,” 46.

56. See 9.7 (pp. 361–65).

57. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (2004; repr., Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 361.

58. My argument has said nothing about passages being “isolated” (I am not sure what this would actually mean, and I am not sure if it is relevant), and nothing about “many clear passages that open all ministry roles to both men and women.” As far as I know, other egalitarians have not made this claim either—because there simply are not “many clear passages

that open all ministry roles to both men and women” (including those whom Grudem directly cites; readers will carefully notice the evidence is unsupportive; the quotes from Gasque, Groothuis, Nathan, and Keener do not assert that any biblical passages are “isolated,” at least in the sense Grudem means it).

59. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 362–65.

60. As indicated above, we might all agree with Grudem that the prohibition passages (at the very least 1 Tim 2:12) “are found at the heart of the New Testament material on how a church should function” (*Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 363).

61. I say “generally” because of the possibility of textual variation and manuscript discoveries altering such numerical figures.

62. This certainly has been the case with textual criticism where the church’s knowledge of only a handful of NT manuscripts during the Reformation Era and prior erupted to knowledge of 5,800+ manuscripts by the 21st century. In fact, so drastic was this increase in knowledge about the text of the NT that many NT passages that were considered in the original NT text are no longer thought of as such (e.g., 1 John 5:8; John 8:1–11); this is, of course, why Christian Bibles today (e.g., ESV, NIV, etc.) jump from (for example) John 5:3 to 5:5, and why the (later) Western manuscript tradition is several percent larger than the (earlier) Alexandrian tradition.

63. In passing, this is one reason why the lack of any chapter on the incomprehensibility of God in Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* (and many other contemporary theology texts) is particularly unfortunate. Cf. Merold Westphal, “A Philosophical/Theological Hermeneutic,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley Porter and Beth Stovel (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), and Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 2:41.

64. For an insightful discussion as to how religious institutions change over time through innovation, see Dwight Zscheile, “Disruptive Innovations and the Deinstitutionalization of Religion,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 14, no. 2 (2015): 5–30. For a helpful, parallel work in scientific theories and intelligibility nuclei in social constructionist epistemology, see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962) and Kenneth Gergen, *Realities and Relationships* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), respectively.

65. The distinction between “exegesis” (what the original author meant to the original audience then) and “interpretation” (what God is saying through the same text to us today) may be helpful at this point. See Westphal, “A Philosophical/Theological Hermeneutic.”

66. Duncan and Stinson, “Preface,” x–xi.

67. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 364.

68. Cf. the attitude of King James Onlyists, where erroneous readings (textual and translational) are preferred above superior readings for the sake of maintaining “clarity” and “certainty.” For a discussion of this, see James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009).

69. On “the pilgrim character of the Bible” see Phyllis Trible, “Eve and Miriam,” in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeological Society, 1994), 9.

70. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 33.

71. If space allowed, it would be edifying to examine the origins of this attitude (claims of finality, triumphalism, epistemological certainty, singular absolutist authority, etc.) in modern philosophy. Grudem’s attitude here and elsewhere in his works appears to embody the fundamentalist galvanization of modernism against the more recent backdrop of postmodern uncertainty. For more on this important topic, especially as it relates to bibliology, see Carlos Bovell, *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012); idem, *Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015); James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox,

1984); Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012); N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (New York: HarperOne, 2013); John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Toronto: Clements, 2004); idem, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Toronto: Clements, 2004); Craig Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016). For more on this topic in general, see Greg Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

72. The argument from Gal 3:28 is not simply, “Gal 3:28 asserts that there is equality in the church, so women should be able to do everything men can do” (a common caricature propagated by critics of women pastors). Rather, the argument is, “Gal 3:28 asserts that there is inherently no sexism in the body of Christ, and forbidding women from doing certain activities [e.g., pastoring] solely because of their sex is sexist.”

73. Rebecca Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 215.

74. Perhaps the two most recent and substantive projects on the verse have been Cynthia Long Westfall, “The Meaning of ἀθηνῆται in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *JGRChJ* 10 (2014): 138–73 and Hübner, “Revisiting ἀθηνῆται in 1 Timothy 2:12.”

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