A woman must quietly receive instruction with all submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was first deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. (1 Tim 2:11–14 NASB)

Among theological conservatives, the 1 Timothy 2 passage is pivotal in determining the role of women in the church. For today’s “traditionalists,” this passage mandates the subordination of women to men in the church because the headship/submission principle is grounded in the created order, an order that Christianity redeems, but does not alter. Today’s traditionalists/male hierarchists also claim to be upholding the historic interpretation of this passage. New research on early Protestant beliefs concerning natural law and the spiritual and civil kingdoms, however, brings their claim into serious question.

As a history teacher, I have long been aware that, prior to the nineteenth century, the general population applied creation ordinances to the culture at large, dictating the subordination of women to men in government, business, the academy, etc.—and in the church, or so I assumed. Then, when traditionalists lost the culture wars of the nineteenth century, they jettisoned the application of creation ordinances to the civil kingdom and sought to defend their remaining turf (the church) ever more vigorously—or so I assumed. What I was not able to do was to reconcile the traditional theological position with the clear connection of the early women's rights movement with evangelical revival and reform. That appeared to be evangelical Protestantism against itself, and it remained a conundrum until I read David VanDrunen’s book, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought.

According to VanDrunen, early Protestant Reformers held to a two-kingdom view that was in some ways similar to their medieval forbearers. This is especially clear in the writings of both Luther and Calvin. They both defend the moral goodness of the sword-bearing state and the Christian’s participation in that state. They believe Christians are citizens of two kingdoms, both ordained by God. These two kingdoms, however, operate for different ends and under very different rules. The spiritual kingdom is expressed on earth in the church, which has a redemptive and eschatological purpose. It does not bear the sword and submits to the redemptive ethic of Scripture as revealed in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the temporal kingdom of this world can use the sword and is based in natural law. Natural law, for the Reformers, is that law imprinted on the consciences of humankind (Rom 2:14–15) and found in the moral principles underlying the Mosaic law. Natural law also finds its origin in creation ordinances.1

God rules both kingdoms. In the church or spiritual kingdom, he rules as redeemer in Jesus Christ; in the state and other social institutions, he rules as creator and sustainer. Consistent with Protestant convictions, both Luther and Calvin believed that sin has marred human ability to discern fully natural law outside of God’s special revelation and regenerating grace; nevertheless, through the remnants of natural law, God graciously restrains the consequences of sin in this world.2

After doing extensive research on exegeses of the 1 Timothy 2 passage, I have concluded that all prominent Christian theologians before the mid-nineteenth century held something similar to a natural law/two-kingdom view. For them, natural law/creation ordinances mandated the subordination of women to men in the temporal kingdom. The church, on the other hand, was animated by egalitarian principles, such as the priesthood of all believers. The church might honor “the order preserved by the world” (as Luther expressed it), but the principle of male headship/female subordination was not organic to the church. My purpose in this article is to look at Luther, Calvin, and other early exegetes through this natural law/two-kingdom lens and, in doing so, rediscover the authentic traditional interpretation of this passage.

Martin Luther’s view

Martin Luther (1483–1546) begins his discussion of 1 Timothy 2:11 by connecting appropriate female conduct in the public realm to female conduct in the church:

She is not to be the spokesman among the people. She should refrain from teaching, from praying in public. . . . This passage makes a woman subject. It takes from her all public office and authority. On the other side is the passage in Acts (8:27) about Queen Candace. We read many such examples in sacred literature—that women have been very good at management: Huldah, Deborah, Jael, the wife of the Kenite, who killed Sisera. (2 Kings 22:14; Judges 4:14, 17) Why, then, does Paul say here that he deprives them of the administration of the Word as well as work? You should solve the argument in this way. Here we properly take “woman” to mean “wife,” as he reveals from his correlative phrase (v. 12) “to have authority over man,” that is, over her husband. He calls the husband “man,” so he calls the wife “woman.” Where men and women have been joined together, there the men, not the women, ought to have authority. . . . He wants to save the order preserved by the world—that a man be the head of a woman, as 1 Corinthians 11:3 tells us.3

At the beginning of this passage, Luther makes its application universal, both in state and church. Women are subject and are not to rule. That is the order “preserved by the world.” However,
having stated the basic premise of the passage, he acknowledges exceptions, in the world and in the church.

Luther then moves on to verse 12. In English, his words are translated “to have authority.” He explains that this means “she ought not take over for herself the heritage which belongs to a man so that a man says to her: ‘My lord.’ She wants her own wisdom to have priority, that whatever she has said should prevail and whatever the man says should not.”4 We must conclude, then, that Luther sees this verse as a prohibition against women flaunting their wisdom over that of a man or attempting to usurp his rightful position.

Verse 13 makes it clear that Paul’s principles are derived from creation. Luther later summarizes this position in his discussion of verse 14 by saying, “God himself has so ordained that man be created first—first in time and first in authority. His first place is preserved in the Law.”5 Creation and the fall establish Adam as superior in rank and in constitution. Luther then goes into a rather lengthy exposition of verse 15. He brings his entire discussion of verses 9–15 to a close with the following statement: “Thus you see how he wants Christian women to behave in public life, in the home, etc. If the Lord were to raise up a woman for us it is an import, so to speak, from the temporal world. That is what the see the subordination of women as operative in the church, rather than the church; however, he does assign the “external” government of the church to the care of the state.7 Consequently, although Luther sees the subordination of women as operative in the church, it is an import, so to speak, from the temporal world. That is what he means in his exegeses of 1 Timothy 2:11 and 1 Corinthians 11:3, when Luther writes, “He [Paul] wants to save the order preserved by the world—that a man be the head of a woman.” Again, when Luther is explaining 1 Timothy 2:14, he says, “His first place is preserved by the Law.” This, too, is referring to the law of nature/creational law, the law that governs the kingdom of this world, or should govern this world if humankind is to prosper.

The fact that female subordination is not organic to the kingdom of Christ and his church is explained more fully in Luther’s exegesis of Galatians 3:28: “In the world, and according to the sinful nature, there is a great difference and inequality of persons, and this must be observed carefully...” But in Christ there is no law, nor difference of persons, there is only one body, one spirit, one hope, one Gospel (Ephesians 4:4–6).”6 Here again, when Luther uses the word law, he appears to be referring to natural law. This law applies to the church insofar as the church promotes peace and avoids confusion, but, ultimately, according to Luther, the Christian conscience “knows nothing of the law—but has only Christ before its eyes.”9

I do not believe Luther would refer to the subordination of women in the church as the law of the gospel, as some later theologians do.10 This kind of language would seem confusing to him and his understanding of the two kingdoms. It is also inconsistent with the dichotomy Luther builds between law and grace. Female subordination is a principle observed in the church, but it finds its origin in the laws that define civil society, not the church.

John Calvin’s view

No doubt John Calvin (1509–1564) was familiar with Luther’s commentaries. Calvin was considered the greatest exegete of his time and is still authoritative today. There is a remarkable coherence in his exegeses that creates complex connections between individual passages and the broader principles of the Christian faith. By looking at the specific words he uses in his exegesis, we can make correct assumptions about connections to his larger, systematic worldview.

In 1 Timothy 2:11, Paul instructs women to learn quietly, which Calvin equates with silence. Calvin then expands on Paul’s argument in verse 12:

12. But I suffer not a woman to teach. Not that he takes from them the charge of instructing their family, but only excludes them from the office of teaching, which God has committed to men only. On this subject we have explained our views in the exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. If anyone bring forward by way of objection, Deborah (Judges 4:4) and others of the same class, of whom we read that they were at one time appointed by the command of God to govern the people, the answer is easy. Extraordinary acts of God do not overturn the ordinary rules of government, by which he intended that we should be bound. Accordingly, if women at one time held the office of prophets and teachers, and that too when they were supernaturally called to it by the Spirit of God, He who is above all law might do this; but being a particular case, this is not opposed to the constant and ordinary system of government.11

For what reason are women made subject? Calvin argues that it is so by God’s command, as revealed in the order of creation.

According to Calvin, female subordination is grounded in “the ordinary rules of government” and “the true order of nature.”12 These form the basis of civil authority. In the church, however, Calvin acknowledges the possibility of cases particulier et extraordinaire.13 The fact that God’s commands at creation are binding on human society in its ordinary business does not mean that God cannot supersede the law of nature if he wills.

Although the subordination of women is observed in the church, it is not organic to life in the church. This becomes more evident in Calvin’s Institutes, particularly as he distinguishes between civil law and authority (book 4, chapter 20) and the principles that should govern the church (book 4, chapter 10).

In his two-kingdom theology, Calvin repeatedly says, “The spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very widely separated,”14 yet they do not exist in opposition to one another. The church addresses the spiritual and internal while civil
insitutions relate to "the external regulation of manners." The relationship between men and women finds its basis in this external regulation of manners. The mission of the church is rooted in the redemptive and eschatological work of Jesus Christ. Creation ordinances and natural law, on the other hand, form the basis for the "regulation of manners" and civil order in general.

Although Christian liberty is foundational to life in the church, Calvin admonishes believers to be self-disciplined, adhering to principles of decency and order, these being the mediators of other lesser ordinances and traditions. In book 4, chapter 10, of Calvin’s Institutes, he elaborates on these lesser ordinances in some detail. As regards "decency," Calvin lists administering the sacraments with dignity, women appearing with heads covered in public, praying on one’s knees, men worshipping with heads uncovered, and modes of burying the dead. Under "order," Calvin includes reverential behavior when the sermon is preached, the singing of hymns, days set apart for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and Paul’s prohibition against women teaching in the church. All of these behaviors are of a kind and, in the church, take their direction from the broader principles of decency and order, custom, and, most importantly, the edification of the church. (Note the absence of any appeals to creation ordinances.)

Later in book 4, chapter 10, Calvin sums up his position:

What? Is religion placed in a woman’s bonnet, so that it is unlawful for her to go out with her head uncovered? Is her silence fixed by a decree which cannot be violated without the greatest wickedness? Is there any mystery in bending the knee, or burying a dead body, which cannot be omitted without a crime? By no means. For should a woman require to make such haste in assisting a neighbour that she had not time to cover her head, she sins not in running out with her head uncovered. And there are some occasions on which it is not less seasonable for her to speak than on others to be silent. Nothing, moreover, forbids him who, from disease, cannot bend his knees, to pray standing. . . . Nevertheless, in those matters the custom and institutions of the country, in short, humanity and the rules of modesty itself, declare what is to be done or avoided.

In concluding this chapter on church government, Calvin writes, "Lastly, instead of here laying down any perpetual law for ourselves, let us refer the whole end and use of observances to the edification of the Church, at whose request without offence allow not only something to be changed, but even observances which were formerly in use to be inverted." This is indeed a provocative statement, given the fact that Calvin includes Paul’s prohibitions against women teaching in the church in his list of "observances" that might be altered under varying circumstances.

Calvin’s exegesis of the various Bible passages concerning women in the church are consistent with the above discourse. He wrestles with the seemingly contradictory passages concerning the relationship between men and women and brings them all into a coherent whole in his understanding of natural law and the two kingdoms.

For instance, Calvin believes that, in 1 Corinthians 11:3, man is placed in an intermediate position between Christ and the woman. Yet, at the same time, in Galatians 3:28, Paul says, "in Christ there is neither male nor female." Calvin resolves this dilemma as follows: "When he [Paul] says that there is no difference between the man and the woman, he is treating of Christ’s spiritual kingdom, in which external qualities are not regarded or made any account of." This spiritual kingdom has its present expression in the church, and, in fact, it is this Christian liberty and equality that underlie the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. However, in this world, our liberty and equality in Christ always should respect social order and decorum. Therefore, Calvin goes on to qualify his position: "In the meantime, however, he [Paul] does not disturb civil order or honorary distinctions, which cannot be dispensed with in ordinary life. Here [1 Cor 11], on the other hand, he reasons respecting outward propriety and decorum—which is part of ecclesiastical polity."

Calvin later reaffirms this principle that male headship reflects "external arrangement and political decorum." He would regard today’s popular assignment to men of "spiritual headship" as a strange comingling of spiritual and temporal kingdom principles. In accordance with basic Protestant doctrine, Calvin says that the spiritual head of the woman is Christ only; however, in the kingdom of this world, she is subject to man.

Consequently, I believe Calvin sees male headship/female submission as a universal principle as it pertains to the governance of civil society. It may assume different expressions in different times and places, but the principle, as a foundation of civil order, is absolute. This general understanding of the relationship between men and women in civil society, as dictated by the order of creation/natural law, is assumed by all major exegetes until the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, both Luther and Calvin place the external government of the church under civil polity, which also dictated the subordination of women to men in the church.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theologians

A survey of commentaries from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries confirms the influence of Luther and Calvin and the prevalence of a natural law/two-kingdom paradigm. I will make a few brief comments concerning these subsequent theologians.

Heirs to the Calvinist tradition, the Puritans were the first of the English-speaking theologians to add their substantial insight to the 1 Timothy 2 passage. The exegesis of early Puritan commentator Matthew Poole (1624–1679) reads like a paraphrase, except for verse 12. Here, he puts a notable emphasis on the legitimacy of women with an extraordinary call.

In the world, women are subject to men, but, in the church, God sometimes acts contra mundum.

In his discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:3, Poole makes a comparison between the Christ/God and the woman/man relationships (as equal in nature and essence but different in function) similar to that of contemporary hierarchical exegetes. However, elsewhere, Poole describes the headship of man over woman as being "political or economical." Nowhere does Poole describe that headship as spiritual. In fact, in his initial discussion of 1 Corin-
thians 11: 3, Poole argues that, when Paul says that the “head of every man is Christ,” he is referring to all church members, male and female, since Christ is the spiritual head of men and women alike. So, I believe we can conclude that Poole holds to a two-kingdom view: that the creation order and the fall place women in a lower, inferior rank in the temporal (political, economical) kingdom. Therefore, under ordinary circumstances, women are not to exercise leadership over men in the church; nevertheless, the principles of headship and submission are not organic to the spiritual kingdom/church.

Also a Puritan, Matthew Henry (1662–1714), like Poole, does not explicitly expound on a two-kingdom theology. Yet, it is implied in both his expositions of 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14. Concerning the extraordinary call, Henry writes that, although women were not “ordinarily to teach,” it was allowed on “extraordinary occasions.”

In the context of 1 Corinthians 14, Henry justifies Paul’s instructions by saying they are commandments from God. Woman is made subordinate to man and should refrain from any behavior that might suggest she is trying to change ranks. Henry elaborates by saying that “speaking in public seemed to imply, at least at that age, and among that people,” an indecent assumption of superiority on the part of a woman. The same would apply to public teaching. Consequently, such behavior would be shameful in the church. The temporal kingdom, reflecting God’s created order, forbade women to engage in public speaking and teaching. It would be most indecent for the church/spiritual kingdom to do otherwise.

John Gill (1697–1771), a Baptist, was also a Calvinist. In his discussion of verse 11, he says that in public worship women are not to “rise and speak, under a pretence of having a word from the Lord, or being under the impulse of the Spirit of the Lord, as some frantic women have done.” Since the First Great Awakening was at its height when Gill’s commentaries were published (1746–1748), that may be an oblique reference to female participation in the fervor of revival.

Regarding verse 12, Gill writes that the woman is not to “usurp authority over the man; as not in civil and political things, or in things relating to civil government... so not in things ecclesiastical, or what relate to the church and government of it...” I take Gill’s logic at face value—if not in the civil realm, so then not in the church. In his treatment of verse 13, Gill says, “the woman’s subjection to man is according to the laws of nature and creation.”

In conclusion, Gill appears to have an understanding of natural law and the two kingdoms that characterized most of the Reformers up to this point. The subordination of women is grounded in natural law/creation ordinances. Therefore, as women are not to usurp authority over men in the civil realm, so they are not to do so in the ecclesiastical.

Ordained an Anglican priest some years earlier, Thomas Scott (1783–1860) became a Christian through his association with John Newton. Scott’s widely read commentary on the Bible appeared between 1788 and 1792. There is evidence of a two-kingdom understanding in his comments on 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11, particularly as he restricts female subordination to “this lower world.” He makes no reference to male spiritual headship. In addition, he qualifies Paul’s prohibitions in 1 Timothy 2, the exception to the rule being women “who spoke by the spirit of prophecy.”

John Wesley (1703–1791) did not write an extensive commentary on either the 1 Timothy or 1 Corinthians passages. In his Notes on 1 Corinthians 14, however, he says, “Let your women be silent in the churches—Unless they are under extraordinary impulse of the Spirit. For in other cases it is not permitted for them to speak... but to be in subjection—to the man whose proper office it is to lead and to instruct the congregation.”

Wesley’s brevity is more than compensated for by the extensive exegesis of Methodist theologian Adam Clarke (1760–1832). Although Clarke’s development of a two-kingdom theology is not explicit, it is clearly assumed in his remarks on 1 Timothy 2 in regard to male and female roles in the temporal world.

Concerning the extraordinary call, he believes it is evident in 1 Corinthians 11 that women did “prophesy or teach.” So, he too attempts to reconcile Paul’s prohibitions with the biblical record. What Clarke believes is at issue in both 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 is a spirit of contention and arrogance on the part of some women, evident in attempts to usurp the man’s rightful authority—an authority grounded in creation and foundational to the kingdom of this world. Paul has in mind guarding the church against accusations of disorderly conduct.

According to Clarke, Paul is not attempting to suppress women who are acting in obedience to the Holy Spirit. Clarke takes the traditional position concerning the relationship between men and women in civil society. However, in the church, under subjection to the Holy Spirit, he sees the possibility of a different order at work. Clarke, writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is the last of the major, traditional exegetes.

Summary

So, what are the salient points and principles that characterize the traditional exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:11–14?

First of all, the traditional theologians agree that the subordination of woman to man is grounded in creation ordinances and the fall. They also all recognize the creation ordinances as prescriptive in their application to civil society. There is a two-kingdom ideology explicit in Luther and Calvin and implicit in the others. Consequently, none of these exegetes see creation ordinances as organic to the kingdom of Christ and his church. However, the general strictures placed on women in society at large, derived from the creation order and the fall, also are observed in the church. There are two reasons given: (1) so that the church might not cause offense and be accused of disreputable conduct, and/or (2) because the church honors “the order preserved by the world.”

Secondly, all the traditional exegetes seem comfortable with the word usurp, as used in verse 12 in the Authorized Version of the Bible (King James Version). This word rightly conveys their understanding of any attempt on the part of a woman to wrest rank and authority away from the man wrongly.

They also use the word inferior to describe the woman in relationship to the man, without apology. Again, this is because the traditional theologians see the creation ordinances as mandating the subordination of women to men in the temporal kingdom, where social rank and inequality are ordinarily observed. Egalitarian principles govern the spiritual kingdom. Consequently, none of the traditional theologians assigns to men a spiritual
authority. Christ alone is the spiritual head of the church. Male authority is important to the right functioning of civil society, not to the redemptive and eschatological purposes of the church.

Lastly, in the church, here and now, there is the possibility of something contra mundum. All the traditional theologians, except Gill, acknowledge the possibility of a woman with an extraordinary call. Clarke even reprimands women who fail to act under the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In the appendix of Women in the Church, the author conducts a historical survey, similar to mine. However, his conclusions are quite different. He writes, “Throughout the ages the church has traditionally interpreted 1 Timothy 2:11–14 in a straightforward manner. This book has presented extensive data to demonstrate that the traditional reading is correct.” He then goes on to summarize that traditional reading. Included in his summary is the following statement: “For complementarians, the phrase ‘Adam was formed or created first,’ refers beyond chronology to God’s sovereign decree that made males the spiritual heads of God’s kingdom, churches, and homes.”

The present article has demonstrated clearly that, in fact, this is not the authentic traditional interpretation of the 1 Timothy 2 passage. Luther, Calvin, and the others did not believe that creation established men as the spiritual heads of God’s kingdom and churches. Simply put, the true traditional interpretation says that, since male authority/female subordination is grounded in creation, it is normative in the temporal kingdom. Because it is normative in the temporal kingdom, it is also observed in the church. The contemporary “traditional” interpretation says that, because male headship/female subordination is grounded in creation, it is normative in the church (but not applicable outside the church). A major reversal indeed!

Sometime in the mid-twentieth century, exegetes began to argue that “usurp authority” (Authorized Version) has the more neutral meaning of “exercise authority.” This, too, is a substantial departure from the traditional understanding of the passage.

Finally, in addition to making creation ordinances organic to the life of the church, contemporary hierarchists also either reject or ignore the validity of an “extraordinary call,” another significant departure from the true traditional interpretation.

The authentic traditional interpretation of this passage no longer exists. It is disingenous for today’s hierarchists to claim to be its heirs. How the traditional interpretation disappeared takes us back to the two-kingdom paradigm, the nineteenth century, and the “very incarnation of the church into popular culture,” as historian Nathan Hatch has described it. But that is another story for another time.

Notes

4. Luther, Lectures on 1 Timothy, 277.
5. Luther, Lectures on 1 Timothy, 278.
6. Luther, Lectures on 1 Timothy, 280.
7. VanDrunen, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms, 58–59.
12. Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 68.
15. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.1.
16. Calvin, Institutes, 4.10.29.
17. Calvin, Institutes, 4.10.31.
18. Calvin, Institutes, 4.10.32.
20. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 354.
21. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 354.
22. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 354.
23. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 354.
27. Poole, A Commentary on the Holy Bible, 576.
29. Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, 583.
34. Scott, The Holy Bible, 428.