Today, we are starting a series we’re calling “Lost in Translation.” Over the next few weeks, we’ll be looking at some of the most commonly misinterpreted passages in Scripture—the ones that, if you’re like me, make you cringe a bit.

Some of us come from traditions where you don’t ask questions of the text. If the Bible says it, you believe it. If you ask questions, that means you are questioning God, and that’s not allowed. So I would imagine that as we continue in the series, you might feel fear, and you might have questions that you’ve never thought to ask before, and that’s okay. I invite you to engage that. That’s part of the beauty of following Jesus together.

Our passage today is 1 Timothy 2:11–15.

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.

Well that seems clear. I think there’s been a mistake; what am I doing preaching?

If you’re part of this church or our denomination, women in ministry is probably a non-issue. But for others it might be an issue. Either way, you may or may not know why you think the way you do, so we’re going to talk about it. Hopefully you come away with at least another layer of understanding in what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I want to expose you to the two typical ways this passage has been understood.

There are those who believe this text is making a blanket statement about the role of women in the church. There are other passages that seem to say this same thing, where women are to remain silent, or that they are the glory of man, they are to submit, they can’t lead. When you look at all of the passages that talk about women in the church, it is clear that according to Scripture they can’t lead or teach.

Others point out that for every place that Paul seems to prohibit women from leading in the
church, there is another place where he seems to affirm it. At the end of Romans he commends Phoebe, a deaconess. In that same text he affirms Priscilla and her husband Aquila for their leadership. He calls Junia an apostle. In Galatians 3:28, he says, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” People on this end of the spectrum conclude that any prohibitions are specific to a time and place and circumstance.

It’s probably pretty obvious how I land on the issue, but I want to explain why. And I want to teach what I think Paul is doing in this passage, and why I don’t think gender is what determines how someone is gifted. It’s the Holy Spirit that gifts. To do that, I want to start by engaging with the more traditional or conservative approach.

**A blanket prohibition**

Let’s assume for a moment that Paul is making a blanket statement about women and their role in the church. I get why people come to the conclusion that women have no place as teachers—that’s what it seems to say. But this is where it breaks down for me: if we look at all the texts where Paul addresses women, and we decide that women are not allowed to teach or exercise any authority over a man, how do we live that out?

Some people try to make lists. I’ve seen an article that lists possible roles—president of a denomination, dean of a seminary, pastor, elder, missionary, Sunday School teacher, and so on—and groups them on a spectrum of “allowed” to “prohibited.” But what about the gray areas? Paul doesn’t seem to prohibit women from teaching other women or children, so a women’s Bible study or Sunday School seem to be okay. But when does a boy become a man? Because then she can’t teach him anymore. What about outside of the church? Can a woman be a police officer?

I mean no disrespect here—if you have worked through these passages and landed in this camp, I’m not here to change your mind. But I think we can agree that if we understand this as a blanket statement about the role of women, it gets messy pretty quickly.

**A contextual prohibition**

Is there another way? What if Paul is saying something contextual, specific to a time and place and circumstance, relevant to the culture that he is speaking to? Looking at the opening verses of the book (1 Tim. 1:1–7), we find that 1 Timothy is a letter from Paul to Timothy, a church leader in Ephesus. Paul is writing to Timothy telling him how to handle false teachers—teachers who are misrepresenting the gospel.

I want to talk about three specific things that I think help explain what is going on.

1. **Ephesus.** Timothy was in Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the largest cities in Asia Minor, with about 100,000 residents. One of the things Ephesus was most known for was its devotion to the goddess Artemis. Her temple was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. Many people’s incomes revolved around Artemis worship. Acts 19:26–28 even talks about a riot in Ephesus because Christianity threatened their business and culture. Artemis was a huge deal to the Ephesians.

2. **Artemis worship.** Artemis was the goddess of fertility. It was thought that she had the power to give life and take life, and so it was very common for women to call upon her for help in labor—to

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**DIGGING DEEPER**

1 TIMOTHY 2:9–15

**Historical Context**

What was Going on in Ephesus?

- Many believe an early form of Gnosticism was infiltrating the church. Gnostics taught that:
  1. Eve was created first, and
  2. Eve should be celebrated, because when she ate the forbidden fruit, she was seeking knowledge (*gnosis*), which God was withholding.

- Ephesus was the center of worship of Artemis of the Ephesians. The cult of Artemis was led by priestesses.

- Artemis was thought to protect women in childbirth.

**Paul’s Intent**

**Combat the Heresies**

- Paul reminds the church that Eve was created second, and she did sin by eating the fruit. This counters the Gnostic teaching that Eve was created first.

- Paul’s emphasis on Eve’s deception here is likely due to the context of Gnosticism. In Romans 5:14, he writes that sin came to the world through Adam.

- Many scholars believe Paul is telling women that God (not Artemis) will protect them in childbirth.
speed up the process, ease the pain, or grant a quick death if that is what it came to. What is unique about this cult is that it was entirely run by females. Where males did play a role, they were subservient. People would come to the temple and pay a high priestess for sex. This was thought to reenact spring, in which Artemis blesses the earth with new life.

3. Gnosticism. You may or may not have heard of Gnosticism before, but it’s a way of thinking that was extremely influential and problematic to Christian beliefs. Even though it’s not mentioned by name, it is commonly taught against in the New Testament. Very basically, a Gnostic worldview saw the material world as bad. The goal of humanity was to ascend to higher spiritual knowledge, or gnosia. In the Gnostic account of creation, Eve is actually the first human, and she is the one who gives life to Adam. Eve was seen as a heroine to the Gnostics because she desired knowledge, or gnosia. When Paul refers to false teachers in the first seven verses of the letter, it is likely that he is referring to people perpetuating the mythology of the Artemis cult and people who are perpetuating Gnostic beliefs in the church community at Ephesus.

When we consider all of this—the culture in Ephesus, the Artemis cult, and the Gnostic influences of the day—we have a better lens to engage and understand what Paul is trying to say in our passage.

So, when Paul is saying he does not permit a woman to teach or assume authority over a man, and that she’ll be saved through childbearing, I think it is contextual. He is addressing a group of women who were false teachers influenced by the Artemis cult, in which female supremacy was the norm.

When Paul talks about the authority these women are exercising, he uses a word that is used nowhere else in the entire New Testament: authentein, translated as “exercise authority.” Other times when Paul is referring to authority, he uses a different word, exousia, which has an emphasis of generic authority or influence or power. But authentein carries a sense of abusing power and acting on your own authority. These women are teaching things that aren’t true, and doing it in an abusive way, so Paul tells them to be silent. Interestingly, he still tells them to learn. He is saying to learn and absorb from people who are wiser than you. Learn in silence. Don’t teach until you know what you are teaching. That is wise. I would hope he would tell those women to be quiet! You can’t teach until you’ve learned.

When Paul talks about Adam being born before Eve, Eve being the one to sin, and women being saved through childbearing, he is addressing the Gnostic and mythological influences that dominated Ephesian culture—influences that gave primacy to women over men and taught women to call upon Artemis to stay safe in labor.

I don’t see Paul telling all women they are not made to teach or lead, but instead he is correcting an abuse of power, and he’s telling Timothy how to fix it. He’s supporting a young leader who is ministering to a mess of a church.

DIGGING DEEPER
1 TIMOTHY 2:9–15

Definitions
Authentein (exercise authority)

- Authentein is used only once in the Bible. Often translated “have (or exercise) authority,” the word carries a sense of domination or wrongful seizing of power. Pre-1940’s English translations typically rendered authentein as “usurp authority” or “dominate.”

- The Ephesian women were probably exerting dictatorial authority over the men in the church, as was normal for Artemis worship.

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Why does it matter?

As sure as I am of my understanding of this text, and as much as I have studied and read and wrestled and prayed and wondered if I was just trying to hear what I wanted to hear, I need to acknowledge how I come to this text.

This was a really difficult and painful sermon to write. The question I kept coming back to was, What is the word for the community? What is this sermon about? The role of women? How to read and engage the Scriptures? How the Spirit gifts us?

It became clear that the only way I could preach this sermon is if I talk about something I don't really want to talk about. In seminary they say to never teach from a wound, and that is so very wise. But I think I need to show you the wound, because it shows how our interpretations and understandings of the Bible can do the opposite of what God intends.

I sensed God calling me to seminary and ministry when I was nineteen years old. I was at North Park University in Chicago, and I felt like I had purpose for the first time. Not because I was sensing a call to ministry, but simply because I was sensing a call to something. And what I mean by “call” is this sense that you were made for something, you were given something that is useful, and God wants to use it for his kingdom. I sensed what Jesus kept saying to me was ministry: “love my church, give what you have to my people.” Yes, God. Yes, God.

When my dad came to pick me up and make the eight-hour trip home for the summer, I was excited to tell him about what I sensed. I told him my process, my stories, my sense of calling. I think I blocked out the rest of that conversation. I don’t remember the words he used to question me, but he was the first. Fortunately, that dynamic has changed since. My family jokingly and embarrassingly calls me “The Rev.” My dad sees God at work in me. I asked him for his permission to share this story, which brought that conversation up again for the first time in almost ten years. I learned that he still had some confusion and discomfort about what I was doing. That wound that I thought had healed was all of a sudden bleeding again. But the wound isn’t about my dad. The wound comes from knowing that there are still people who will see my gender before they see Jesus.

In that conversation, my dad made a comment that has stuck with me. He said, “Jen, the fundamentalism I grew up in runs deep.” In that moment, I realized my dad is also wounded from the interpretations he inherited. And that has produced frustration and anger as he works through these things. As we continued to talk about my experience of his comments, he was so broken and remorseful as he saw the effects and recognized his own responsibility, realizing a wound was reopened because of his words and his understanding of Scripture.

It’s not just my dad and I who have experienced hurt and pain, or maybe even a delay in following God’s calling, from ways we have understood the Bible. I believe the Enemy’s greatest and strongest work is to cause us to misunderstand God’s Word in a way that binds up and constricts and prevents where God’s intent is freedom and life in Christ for all people.

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Listen to and share this sermon online at cbe.today/1tim2.

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