THE SCHOLARSHIP OF PATRIARCHY (ON 1 TIMOTHY 2:8-15):
A RESPONSE TO WOMEN IN THE CHURCH, EDS. KÖSTENBERGER, SCHREINER & BALDWIN

Alan G. Padgett

One of the most hotly contested passages in the New Testament these days is 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The cultural reason for this is clear: The ordination of women in the Church is a major issue of debate among traditional and evangelical denominations. Biblically-minded Christians are rightly concerned about the meaning of this passage for ministry today. And, in response to that concern, a large number of scholars have written articles, commentaries and now even entire books on these few verses.

Readers of Priscilla Papers will no doubt know of our President Emerita’s book, I Suffer Not a Woman (by Catherine and Richard Kroeger, published by Baker Books in 1992). In a counter-move to that volume, Baker Books has just released a new work on this same passage, Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schréiner and H. Scott Baldwin (1995). The purpose of this scholarly collection is clear: to marshal the tools of biblical scholarship and theology in defense of the subordination of women in the church, and the exclusion of women from teaching men (the so-called “complementarian” view). The authors join in the attempt to refute the growing consensus among scholars that “Paul required only that Ephesian women not teach or exercise authority over men, since they were infected with an anomalous cultural outlook” (15)—in other words, the women in this passage were being deceived by false teachers.1

What we have in this book, then, is an example of the scholarship of patriarchy. I mean the term “patriarchy” here in a literal sense, because in fact the authors do favor the rule of men in church and home. (I do not mean these seven brothers are “anti-women” but rather that they favor the rule of men.) The question before us thus becomes: How good is this scholarship? Do the collective efforts of these seven men refute the growing consensus of biblical scholars that in 1 Timothy 2 Paul restricts the teachings of women for local and cultural reasons?2 The answer to this question is “No.” In fact, a critical reading of this book in the light of modern scholarship demonstrates just how weak the case for a patriarchal reading of 1 Timothy 2 really is.

In general we can discern two approaches to 1 Timothy 2 concerning women: an absolutist reading that applies it to all times and places, and a contingent reading that finds the passage speaks to its original context, but which its author did not mean to be universal. Women in the Church seeks to defend an absolute reading, against the recent mainstream view.

Overall this is a book which was worth writing and publishing, because the writers offer some valuable insights, and good scholarly knowledge can be found in it. In the end, however, the bad outweighs the good. The negative rhetoric, biased arguments, and occasional illogic significantly detract from the kind of outstanding scholarship the book is supposed to exemplify.

Issues raised between the contingent and absolute readings of the text are not simply matters of scholarly opinion. A major issue is how to determine when the Bible speaks to a particular time, or when and what principles and teachings are for today as well. This is a matter of hermeneutics and biblical theology. But alas, that issue is not tackled at all in this book! Despite a chapter on hermeneutics (Yarbrough) and on the New Testament against itself (Brown), a good discussion of this problem is not forthcoming.

My own view begins with two principles from Martin Luther. First, Luther taught that the essential and binding teachings of Scripture “bear Christ,” that is, are in accord with the one full revelation of the Living Word in the flesh of Jesus Christ. The Bible is the book of Christ, for Luther, who also developed the “Scripture interprets Scripture” criterion: that is, a particular teaching which is in accord with what the whole Bible teaches is binding and universal.3 Considerations such as these demand attention by the authors of this volume. But rather than discuss these important matters, Brown would rather condemn evolution (200-206) and Yarbrough would take aim at recent “liberalizing attitudes.”

Yet another major point has to do with presuppositions in biblical exegesis. Our brothers accuse me and the mainstream of being influenced by modern feminism, rather than the Bible. I accuse these brothers in Christ of being biased against women’s leadership, because these men have absorbed the patriarchal, worldly presuppositions of traditional Western culture (what Yarbrough calls the “historic” position). As the book’s introduction rightly points out, the issue here is “Who among us is truly open to the biblical message?” and “Who is free of the trappings of culture and tradition?”(9). Of course no one is really free of cultural presuppositions. Yet although the real question, as Brown rightly notes, has to do with which reading of the Bible best explains all the data, Brown nevertheless asserts

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that any egalitarian view must be based on feminism rather than facts (204).

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Our seven brothers in Christ claim a contingent reading of 1 Timothy 2 is biased by modern feminism. However, this claim is refuted in the book itself. The history of the interpretation of this passage, written by Daniel Doriani, includes several examples of Christian writers giving a contingent reading of 1 Timothy 2 before modern feminism arose, even as early as 1666! Do they really think that Margaret Fell was influenced by modern feminism? And when Doriani claims that Fell’s work, Women Speaking Justified (1667), “had little influence” he is mistaken. Not only was Fell influential among Quakers, her book has been read and discussed for centuries. Doriani also labels Fell a “protofeminist” and calls Catherine Booth, Frances Willard and Katherine Bushnell “early feminist writers” (248). Such claims are simply anachronism of the worst kind. That these women might simply have been biblical Christians, whose social context allowed them to see what the Bible really does say about women, is beyond the imagination of Doriani. For him, I suppose, anyone (from any era) who is not absolutist must be “feminist!” Doriani’s section also ignores the work of Phoebe Palmer, the most influential Christian woman in the nineteenth century, whose lengthy work advocating the ministry of women, The Promise of the Father, was widely read—but she, too, was no “feminist!” The only woman biblical commentator who could justifiably be called a “protofeminist” was Elisabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), arguably the most learned and important woman Bible scholar of the age. Not surprisingly, Doriani ignores her work.

Doriani rightly says that “cultural conditions also shape our presuppositions” (214) and that “genuine inquiry into the past entails reading and comprehending the sources, then reporting what they said, without massaging data to fit preferred theses” (220). This is a noble goal, which unfortunately his chapter does not always attain. One last example of Doriani’s prejudice against women in leadership is his reference, on the very next page (221), to Christian examples of Doriani’s prejudice against women in leadership. Unfortunately his chapter does not always attain. One last preferred theses” (220). This is a noble goal, which reporting what they said, without massaging data to fit the past entails reading and comprehending the sources, then that “genuine inquiry into presuppositions” (214) and that “genuine inquiry into the past entails reading and comprehending the sources, then reporting what they said, without massaging data to fit preferred theses” (220). This is a noble goal, which unfortunately his chapter does not always attain. One last example of Doriani’s prejudice against women in leadership is his reference, on the very next page (221), to Christian women who are called ministrae by Pliny in the second century A.D. Now anyone else would translate this as “ministers” but Doriani translates it as “deaconsesses.” He insists that they “possibly held minor office in the church.” How does he know they held only a minor office? Only his own bias, I suggest, leads him to “massage the data” in that direction. On the contrary, there is growing evidence for women leaders and priests in the early church prior to Constantine the Great.  

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A better chapter is the one written by an editor, Köstenberger. He provides a convincing syntactical analysis of v.12, concluding that the verbs “to teach” and “to have authority” (authentein) are either viewed both negatively or both positively by the author, on the basis of the language used (89). This leaves open the possibility that both “to teach” and the term authentein can be tainted in a negative way in the mind of the original author. Köstenberger is wrong to assert that “to teach” is always positive in Paul, as Titus 1:11, 1 Timothy 1:7 and 6:3 make clear. In the Pastoral, at least, “to teach” can indeed be negative. This fact undermines a major point the book seeks to make, viz. that Paul forbids good teaching and good authority to women. On grammatical grounds it is possible (contra our brothers) that by “to teach” in v. 12 Paul meant a kind of teaching that was tainted by heresy. At the same time, the unusual term authentein probably does have some kind of negative connotation in v. 12 (despite the chapter by the third editor, Baldwin, which tries to argue otherwise).

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Baldwin does provide a helpful list of all the places where this unusual verb is used in Greek literature (it only occurs once in the New Testament). But his interpretation of this data attempts to whitewash the negative connotations found in its use. Baldwin asserts that the “root meaning” (79) is simply the concept of authority. He likewise talks of “one unifying concept” (73), viz. to have authority. However, linguists today reject the idea of “root” or essential meanings for words, common to earlier word-study approaches to semantics. Rather, the same word can do different jobs without there necessarily being an “essential” meaning. In fact, various meanings including “to dominate,” “to act independently,” “to exercise one’s own judgment” and even “to commit murder” are listed by Baldwin himself as uses of this term, all of them having subtle negative connotations (at least in the context of Christian love and service, as Baldwin himself notes, 75 n.23). Baldwin’s arguments that the verb in v. 12 has no negative baggage is weak (e.g., 77f. on its etymology). The verb comes from the Greek word for “self” and probably had negative overtones for Christian hearers. On the other hand, Baldwin does refute a number of speculative meanings put forward by egalitarian authors. And he does provide the data on the basis of which we can come to a more sophisticated conclusion than he does. I would argue that the word should be translated “to have authority” (and not “to usurp authority” [KJV] or “to thrust one’s self forward” or some such extreme paraphrase.) Nevertheless, it probably did carry a subtle negative connotation to the original readers of this sentence.

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Another good job of refuting speculative arguments is given by Steven Baugh, in a chapter on the city of Ephesus in the first century. Baugh does argue convincingly that Ephesus was not a bastion of women’s rights at this time. But he nowhere even considers, much less refutes, the idea that a small group of philosophers (like Gnostics) might
have been teaching the equality of women, contrary to the rest of society. And he himself goes too far in suggesting in several places that there was no rise in the social status of women during the Imperial period. For example, he notes that women had better legal status during that time (33), but refuses to correlate legal and social status. That is an obvious blunder, since legal status is simply an aspect of social status. Baugh likewise downplays the importance of the leadership of women in religion. But religious status, too, is an aspect of social status, especially before the Enlighment privatization of religion. In traditional societies, religion and society were much more unified. Baugh seems to read back an American separation between church and state into the first century (42-45). Here we see some of the prejudice against women in leadership coming to play yet again. But the worst example is Baugh’s suggestion that women were not really oppressed in Greco-Roman society. He writes, “There is no evidence of Ephesian denigration of women per se” even though in philosophy, literature, and law—in every area of life in the Greco-Roman world—women in general were oppressed and considered inferior. He goes on to object to using the word “confinement” concerning women’s roles in the Roman Empire, since women had authority in domestic affairs. Perhaps, he writes, “They may not have held public office or taught, not because it was forbidden by domineering men, but because they did not care to. They had their own spheres of influence” (51). Not only does Baugh commit gross anachronism by reading his own Victorian “sphere” theory of gender roles into the first century, he really shows the patriarchal nature of his bias in this passage. However, other than showing the patriarchal prejudice of this book, his chapter does not affect a contingent reading of 1 Timothy, other than showing the patriarchal prejudice of this book, since women had authority in domestic affairs. Perhaps, he writes, “They may not have held public office or taught, not because it was forbidden by domineering men, but because they did not care to. They had their own spheres of influence” (51). Not only does Baugh commit gross anachronism by reading his own Victorian “sphere” theory of gender roles into the first century, he really shows the patriarchal nature of his bias in this passage. However, other than showing the patriarchal prejudice of this book, his chapter does not affect a contingent reading of 1 Timothy.

Tom Schreiner provides a close reading of the passage, in dialogue with contemporary scholarship. Yet while Schreiner’s chapter is the heart of this book, he is wooed by an attractive mistake. He focuses too much on the sentence itself, apart from its broader literary and historical context. He sometimes ignores the ability of context to mitigate the “obvious” meaning of a sentence. For example, if I tell my son who is just learning to drive, “I don’t want you to have any passengers,” the sentence reads like an absolute. If we focused just on my command, out of context, it would seem as if I intended my son never to have passengers in the car. But that is not the case. My command was limited to his early driving experience, as he and I both understand. Schreiner, and indeed all seven of these men, focus too much on v. 11-12 without considering the impact of the social and literary context of the verses. In other words, Schreiner gets the context mostly right (107-114) but ignores the impact of context upon the meaning of v. 11-12.

Take, for example, a major question Schreiner poses for the contingent theory. If Paul was egalitarian, and if the women in Ephesus were told not to teach because they had been lead astray by false teachers, why does Paul not condemn the male false teachers, too? “If both men women were involved in the heresy, why does Paul forbid only the women from teaching men?” (137). The answer is simple: context, context, context! Behind Schreiner’s question is the false assumption that v. 11-12 were written to be general church law for all time. If and only if that were so, we would expect Paul to exclude from teaching and authority in the church all people, men and women, who were seeking office but
were influenced by heresy. But the Pastorals are not church laws for all time.

1 Timothy 2:8-15 was written to a particular time and place, concerning a specific group of women and men who were causing a specific problem in the Ephesian house-churches. Paul had a specific group of men in mind in v. 8, and women in v. 9-10, 15. We must also conclude that these same women are in mind in v. 11-14. It seems, then, that the false teachers were especially effective in leading women astray, at least among those believers who were desirous of becoming bishops, deacons and elders under Timothy. Note that absence of concern about heresy in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and 5:17-22 in discussing men in leadership. The false teachers were men, but they were not seeking to become leaders under Timothy’s hands. Rather, they sought to deceive women in particular (2 Tim 3:6-8) and caused quarrels and anger in the churches (2:23-26). So context can and does answer Schreiner’s question.

A fair consideration of the case for the contingent reading should consider the context of the whole passage, and indeed of the Pastorals as a whole. The passage under discussion begins with v. 8. While the subtitle of this book suggests a work on v. 9-15, in fact the focus is almost exclusively on v. 12, as the editors candidly remark (10, 210). When read in a broader context, I believe there are ample clues (to those who do not ignore them) that the author had particular cultural issues in mind, when limiting the teaching and authority of women in church. Besides those already mentioned, here are four further clues:

1. The “therefore” of v. 8 refers back to the desire on Paul’s part that the church should lead a “quiet and peaceable life, pious and respectful in all things” (v. 2). This reflects Paul’s concern with persecution at that time. It is the reason that he asks men not to quarrel and become angry when they pray in church (“in every place”). Likewise he wants bishops to be well thought of by outsiders (3:7). The “in every place,” in its original context, applies to the house-churches in Ephesus, yet Schreiner writes that “perhaps the words ‘in every place’ refer to all churches everywhere, not just those in Ephesus” (113). This is very unlikely! Paul is writing to Timothy about specific men in specific house-churches, throughout the Pastorals. He is not creating a general rule about how to pray. After all, a multi-cultural, multi-linguistic thinker like Paul knew that what counts as respectable and pious differs from culture to culture (1 Cor 10:31-33). Paul’s concern is that a quarrelsome church must not rock the boat during a time of persecution. He is not concerned to give universal marching orders for all time.

2. Returning to v. 8, why were these men angry? What were they quarreling about? Since 1 Timothy as a whole is written to counter false teachings (108), it was probably these false teachings that were causing the quarreling (as Schreiner notes, 113). These facts suggest a contingent application for v. 12, one that applied only to certain wealthy women, in a context of false teaching and concern about persecution.

3. The next verse (v. 9) addresses the “women, likewise.” In other words, the same cultural concern for peace in a context of persecution, and for false teaching, is passed from the verse on men to the verses on women. Here Paul addresses wealthy women, who had gold and fine clothes, and who “proclaim religion.” The Greek word here (epangello) can mean to proclaim, to promise, or to make known. The word for “religion” is an odd one, much more likely to be used by pagans than Christians. This may, then, be a term that these women were using for themselves, rather than Paul’s own language. They were seeking to be leaders and teachers in the Ephesian church, that is, to proclaim the Christian religion as they understood it. Of course (against Schreiner, 112, who misunderstands our view) these women would not have been the major false teachers, but rather new disciples (see 1 Tim 5:11-15, 2 Tim 3:5-9). It is because of this wish to be teachers, while still being new disciples, that Paul commands them to “learn in silence.” The term “proclaim religion” is ignored by Schreiner, however. Schreiner’s poor argument against the idea that women were beginning to teach heresy is a good example of “massaging the data” in favor of his theory. Schreiner pleads that Paul says that women were only speaking these false things (1 Tim 5:13), not teaching them (111). This is a distinction that makes no difference. We have good reason to believe, then, that Paul had specific women in mind in v. 11-12.

4. There is some kind of application to Paul’s own time going on in the typological or figurative use of Adam and Eve in v. 13-15. This is clear from v. 15, which begins by talking about Eve (“she shall be saved...”) and ends up talking about the Ephesian women (“if they continue in faith...”). It is highly likely that the reference to Adam and Eve here is typological, not a reference to a so-called creation-order of man’s leadership over women. This is an important point, for Paul’s supposed appeal to a “creation-order” (which does not in fact exist in Genesis) is a major argument that absolutists depend upon (200-206, 262). If Paul’s argument in fact is typological or figurative, then he is not asserting that women are submissive to men by nature, but only that the Ephesian women were deceived (as Eve was). Instead of seeking to teach men, they should learn in quiet, and submit to sound teaching (especially to Timothy and Paul!). Note that, contrary to all patriarchal readings (and Schreiner, 124), significantly Paul does not command women to submit to men in this passage. Rather, he simply tells them to learn in submission, that is, in submission to sound teaching—not to men.

Predictably, Schreiner dismisses the figurative or typological interpretation: “It “does not qualify as serious exegesis,” and he labels this view “allegory” (135). His too-casual dismissal ignores the difference between biblical typology, which is very common in the New Testament, and
later allegory. Moreover, every reference to Eve or Adam in the New Testament is typological rather than literal, except in genealogies. The only other reference to Eve also sees her an antitype of those being deceived by the Snake (i.e., the false teachers; 2 Cor 11:3). These facts are well-known to Schreiner yet their importance is ignored. Because of the change of subject from “she” to “they” in v. 15, and because of the universal typological use of Adam and Eve in Paul, the burden of proof is on Schreiner and the absolutists to show why we should not take these verses, too, as typological. In fact, in this same book Doriani understands Paul’s use of Adam and Eve here to be typological (265f)!

All of these important textual and contextual matters point to a contingent reading of this passage. Yet they are either ignored or side-stepped by our seven brothers, even though they have been pointed out for several years by competent scholars in well-known commentaries and journals. It is because of these facts, and not merely because of “feminist presuppositions,” that the contingent reading has become the consensus in contemporary scholarship. Of course, increasing concern for including women equally in the priesthood of all believers may have made these facts more obvious to us, and less obvious to ancient theologians. Nevertheless, all facts are discovered in cultural contexts that make their disclosure possible.

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Schreiner is a competent scholar, and his arguments are worth careful consideration, even when his bias distorts his judgment. But the next chapter, by Yarbrough, is a good example of fundamentalist rhetoric disguised as scholarship. While having the topic of hermeneutics, Yarbrough writes little about it. His definition of hermeneutics is incorrect, and his distinction between hermeneutics and exegesis is naive (157f). Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation, as Yarbrough should know. What Yarbrough calls “hermeneutics” is best called a worldview or perhaps life-philosophy. This is what his chapter is really about. Along with other social and ethical warnings, he cautions us that a contingent reading of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 may lead to the silencing of biblical authority even in evangelical churches (190).

When we do read hermeneutic theory and philosophy of science, we find both agree that there is no “pure” reading of a text, or interpretation of facts. In fact, what counts as a “fact” is based in part on our background theories and assumptions. There is often more than one possible legitimate interpretation of facts, or of texts. It is true that a contingent reading of 1 Timothy 2 is influenced by background assumptions. But so is the interpretation put forth in this book! The authors deceive themselves, and their readers, by claiming just to read what the Bible says, apart from any cultural bias.

Against hermeneutic theory and philosophy of science, Yarbrough feels that “there is in theory one truly best answer” and that the purpose of exegesis is to liberate us from our assumptions (159). I say Yarbrough “feels” because he presents no real argument, only rhetoric and footnotes. In fact, pace Yarbrough, no reading or interpretation is free of assumptions. Rather, some assumptions may help us to understand the original meaning, while others may impede a careful and responsible reading of the text. For example, a bias in favor of Newtonian physics helped astronomers discover the planet Neptune. And the Marxist bias of liberation theologians has helped us see more clearly what the Bible really does teach about wealth and the poor. But rather than face these difficult philosophical issues, Yarbrough jumps into a condemnation of individualism and feminism. Yarbrough feels that a return to traditional gender roles for women would heal the rampant social ills of our country. The fact that these problems also plagued other societies before the existence of feminism does not bother him in the least! Yarbrough demonstrates no knowledge of the history and sociology of gender roles, and their impact on society. He doesn’t even seem to have read a book as simple and obvious a book as Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Gender and Grace (1990), the standard work in the field among evangelical intellectuals. Rather he opts for a simplistic dichotomy: either the Bible really says (i.e., his view) or the evil, liberal individualism of modern society (167). He then goes on (of course!) to attack modern biblical criticism.

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As is appropriate, the theologian has the last word. In this case, it is Harold O. J. Brown, on “The New Testament Against Itself.” Oddly, however, Brown ignores the actual topic of his chapter in order to complain about irrelevant issues. In so doing, several obvious blunders are made. For example, Brown attributes the contingent reading of 1 Timothy 2 to the 1970s when in fact it is centuries older. Of course, historical errors like this make it easier for Brown to attribute the contingent reading to worldly, evil, contemporary feminist presuppositions: “The egalitarian position represents a symptom of a culture, even an entire civilization, which has increasingly strayed from God’s order of creation” (198). But as a matter of fact, although the authors nowhere acknowledge it, the patriarchal position propounded in this book represents a symptom of a culture, even an entire civilization, which has oppressed and ignored women for millennia, and stayed very far from that unity which the Creator desired for Adam and Eve, and all their children.

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Two final rejections of claims made throughout this book seem in order. First, it is certainly true that the great consensus of Christian thinkers from the Patristic to the early modern period have held to an absolute reading of this text. Should we then dare to oppose the consensus of the Church, and the teaching of the ages? I think the answer is “Yes” but only when (a) we can give good textual and contextual...
evidence for why the traditional reading is wrong, and (b) we can demonstrate, historically, that the Church has been deceived by non-biblical presuppositions. This is the kind of move the Protestant Reformers made. As Protestants our seven bothers should agree with them, and with us, that the tradition is not always right (209).

Secondly, Brown and others make the claim that a contingent reading of v. 12 would imply that we have a low view of Biblical authority. Such is not the case, as many egalitarian scholars have argued repeatedly. Rather, it is Brown and the other authors who undermine the authority of the Bible by marrying it to patriarchy. Male-only leadership is false as theology and harmful as an ethic. The Bible is true. These are not, thank God, contrary assertions.

1 I present the evidence for this conclusion in Alan G. Padgett, “Wealthy Women at Ephesus,” Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology 41 (1987), 19-31. Reprints of this article are available from the CBE Book Service.


4 For a brief introduction to Fell, see Sally Bruyneel, “Margaret Fell (1614-1702),” Priscilla Papers 9/3 (Summer 1995), 5f.

5 We are grateful to Catherine Kroeger, who has been influential in making the archeological evidence available in lectures and articles. See her article in the special issue of Christian History 7/1 (Issue 17, 1988) on women in the early church; another on “Bitalia: The Ancient Woman Priest” Priscilla Papers 7/1 (Winter 1993), 11f.; and a third on “Women” in Ralph Martin, et al. (eds.) Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Development (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Pr., 1997). See also Karen Jo Torjesen, When Women were Priests (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

6 See further, James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1961). This is the standard work in the field, applying modern linguistics to biblical studies.

7 Timothy is told to avoid such people, but not take them out of leadership or excommunicate them (2 Tim 3:5). Paul seems to have done this himself (1 Tim 1:20).

8 2 Cor 11:3, Rom 5:14, 1 Cor 15:22, 45.