

Not Permitting Women to Teach: Reading 1 Timothy in Context

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Christians believe that the word of God is inspired and “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16 NIV). This implies that the biblical text sets out transcultural truths valid for the modern world. However, it is also essential that this word of God is understood in its historical and cultural context.

When this principle is expressed, some Christians receive it negatively, as if by considering context we are dismissing the word of God. On the contrary, it does not undermine the importance of the Bible—quite the opposite. Being faithful to the text means, in part, understanding that the New Testament (NT) is comprised of a series of documents written in the first century AD, when the historical and cultural contexts were different.¹ This does not imply that we cannot draw essential lessons from the NT. Rather, it insists that studying these contexts is necessary to understanding what God wants to tell us today.

When I teach about biblical interpretation, I use examples that demonstrate how there are significant themes in the NT to which we are oblivious today. For example, few, if any, of us struggle with the possibility that Jesus did not come in the flesh (1 John 4:2),² with the question of circumcision (a vital issue in the early church, Acts 15:5), with problems between Jews and Gentiles in Rome (Rom 3:1–20), with abuses at the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17–22),³ or with food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:1–11). Nor do we think the Holy Spirit prohibits evangelizing in Asia (Acts 16:6) or interpret greeting each other with a holy kiss as obligatory (Rom 16:16, etc.). These are a few examples of many texts⁴ that demand we read the Bible in its historical-cultural context.

The case of Paul’s first letter to Timothy is no exception. For most complementarians, Paul’s words in 1 Tim 2:11–12 seem clear,⁵ so they are to be read literally and applied universally: “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” (NIV).

A literal understanding of this text could not mean that Paul was disallowing a woman, or women in a particular time or situation “to teach [*didasklein*] or to assume authority [*authenthein*]⁶ over a man” (NIV), but instead means that Paul was unequivocally disallowing all women, everywhere, from holding any position of authority in a congregation. Thus, the text is viewed as a perennial truth making a universal prescription.

However, soon after in 2:15, Paul says: “women will be saved through childbearing . . .” (NIV). A straightforward and literal reading would not only lead us to conclude that salvation is by works but also would make salvation contingent on a biological criterion, removing women who are not able to conceive from the possibility of salvation. Are women saved by bearing children, adding their work to the work of Christ on the cross? Most would

agree that this interpretation is absurd. Scholarly tools are needed to understand the intention behind Paul’s words. We find that the method of interpretation applied to 1 Tim 2:11–12—a plain reading with universal and perennial application as logical and necessary—cannot also be applied to 2:15.⁷ Why does a literal reading of 2:11–12 lead to universal applications whereas 2:15 cannot be understood literally, much less have universal applications?⁸

If we wish to understand the biblical text, we need to deepen our investigation. Drawing firm conclusions from isolated verses instead of considering the whole line of argumentation is unfair to the message of the Bible. Since 1 Tim 2:11–12 comes at the end of a larger section of Scripture (2:8–15), we should not make the mistake of reading these verses in isolation.⁹

Furthermore, not everything in this section of the Bible represents an everlasting regulation. In 1 Tim 2:8, Paul desires the Ephesian men to pray by lifting holy hands “in every place,”¹⁰ but lifting hands is not something all Christians do today. However, Paul’s words are clear: He wants men to lift holy hands when they pray.¹¹ Why is this straightforward command from Paul not understood to be a universal command to be applied in perpetuity? Similarly, 2:9–10, which addresses the problem of lavishly dressed wealthy women, is not taken by most Christians to be relevant and applicable for today. Most Christians do not prohibit women from attending church meetings wearing expensive clothes and jewelry or having elaborately braided hair.

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1 Timothy is full of such contextual expressions not directly applicable today. For example, nowadays we are rarely exposed to myths and endless genealogies (1 Tim 1:4). Some Reformed theologians would not advocate for a literal interpretation of 2:4—God “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (NIV)—preferring to read this text as applicable only to certain people.¹² Only a few would defend that the office of bishop is contingent on being married (1 Tim 3:2)¹³ and even having children (3:4). These days, we may not come across the ascetic ideology of Paul’s day that forbade marriage or required abstention from certain foods (1 Tim 4:3). Much less do cessationist ministries advocate that spiritual gifts are necessarily bestowed through prophecy and the laying on of the hands of the council of elders (1 Tim 4:14).

Today, no one tells a congregation member who has lost his or her job and is temporarily unable to provide for his family that they “have denied the faith and are worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim

5:8). Nor is it advocated that the church should list a widow as a widow only if she is over sixty years of age (1 Tim 5:9–10), or should exclude younger widows from being listed as a widow because they may “want to marry” (1 Tim 5:11–13). We would not propose that young, widowed women get married, raise children, and manage their households because Paul said so (1 Tim 5:14).¹⁴ In the same way, we do not prescribe wine for stomach ailments (1 Tim 5:23) or, more seriously, provide guidance on how to treat slaves (1 Tim 6:1–2).¹⁵ On a theological note, take Paul’s exhortation to his mentee Timothy: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16). This is not usually thought to imply that Timothy has the power to save himself and others as well. However, if we want to advocate for a literal reading of the text, together with its potential universal applications, we would have to conclude this. But we do not because we would end up with some strange prescriptions and stranger theology.

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Conclusion

In summary, all of these examples demonstrate that many of the parts of 1 Timothy represent specific guidelines and recommendations that were in response to problems of the time. This does not indicate that lessons cannot be drawn from the letter, or that there are no perennial truths in it, or that what Paul said to Timothy is not relevant to us today. However, we must not base doctrines on verses taken out of their literary and cultural contexts and, by so doing, undermine the authority of Scripture.

In conclusion, the primary intention of this article is not to imply that Paul was not giving literal instructions to Christians in the first century.¹⁶ Nor is it to argue that Paul’s instructions to Timothy were not relevant and applicable to us today. On the contrary, there are many expressions and declarations in the writings of Paul—and of all biblical authors—that represent truths that we need to submit to, even if they were tackling particular contextual issues of the time. The intention of this article is to make the reader aware that we could become prey to selective interpretation of certain passages in the Bible. For this very reason, it is paramount for Christians to handle the text with care, taking into consideration the whole counsel of the word of God to understand how texts address specific situations and also establish transcultural principles. Reading the Bible without wisdom is surely contrary to Paul’s intent, including reading 1 Tim 2:11–12 as disallowing women—in all places and for all time—to teach, or to hold authority over men.

Notes

1. This includes the sociocultural influences of the time, geographical area, and other contextual aspects such as expressions, style of composition, figure of speech, poetry, etc.

2. Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2000) 146–47.
3. We have, perhaps, changed the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper to something different than what it originally was.
4. For example, cessationists do not think gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and many more that form a central part of many parts of the Bible are active today. They argue that most were used in contextual circumstances during a specific time and then ceased. See Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “A Cessationist View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?: Four Views*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin and Wayne A. Grudem (Zondervan, 1996).
5. This can be extended to vv. 13–14.
6. For other possible translation(s) of *authentēō*, see Philip Barton Payne, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God’s Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality* (Zondervan, 2023) 144; Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016) 292. For an analysis of *authentēs*, a cognate of *authentēō*, see Nicholas Quient, “What Does Cain Have to Do with Eve?: Philo’s *Quod deterius potiori insidiari* 1.78 and 1 Timothy 2:12—Exploring an Overlooked Parallel,” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 9/2 (2020) 85–97.
7. Douglas Moo argues that in 1 Tim 2:8–15 the restrictions set by Paul for women are permanent. However, he goes on to explain that although *sōzō* in v. 15 could entail salvation, in this sense it could not mean that women cannot be saved unless they have babies. See Douglas Moo, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men?,” ch. 9 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, rev. ed. (Crossway, 2012).
8. See Jeffrey D. Miller, “Saved through Childbearing? 1 Timothy 2:15 as a Hermeneutical Caveat,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 20/2 (Fall 2017) 215–25.
9. Some argue that 1 Tim 3:1 concludes the argument of ch. 2. See Sandra L. Glahn, *Nobody’s Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament* (IVP Academic, 2023) 149.
10. “In every place” (*en panti topō*) is possibly an idiom meaning in “meeting places of the church.” George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1992) 128.
11. A literal interpretation would also exempt women from doing so.
12. Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Timothy* (SIL International, 2009) 103.
13. Gerry Breshears argued that men should be married to be pastors on Preston Sprinkle’s Podcast “Theology in the Raw.” See 05:20 at: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=TVLX42Sn3s>.
14. The verb *oikodespoteō* can also mean “be the master or steward” (LSJ 1204).
15. See Stanley E. Porter, “Gender Equality and the Analogy of Slavery,” ch. 17 in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, & Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland, 3rd ed. (IVP Academic, 2021).
16. I believe 1 Timothy 2:12 is an explicit instruction from Paul. However, what does he mean, given the letter’s context? Is it specific to the Ephesian church? Does it concern one woman or many within that church? Or is it for all Christian women in the first century or still in our day?



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