

WHAT DID PAUL MEAN BY SILENCE AND SUBMISSION?

PAUL'S INSTRUCTION IS A CALL FOR WOMEN TO LEARN

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One of the primary passages used to silence women is found in 1 Timothy 2. But is that Paul's goal? What do we need to know about the Ephesians in order to better understand Paul's meaning in 1 Timothy 2:11?¹ First, we need to know that the letter was written to address the influence of false teachers (vs. 1:3–4) and second, we must understand the cultural background of the Ephesians.

A major trade route city on the coast of Asia Minor, Ephesus was home to several house churches drawn from Jewish synagogues. Members included Hellenistic Jewish Christians, Greek proselytes, and converted pagans from surrounding cults.²

The worship of Artemis was a serious challenge to the new church. Acts 19:23–41 describes riots against the Ephesian church. *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* by Stanley Grenz provides a vivid picture of Artemis worship involving hundreds of sacred prostitutes.³ Greek society included *hetaerae*, highly paid and educated non-citizen women who were the regular companions and extramarital sexual partners of upper-class Greek men.

Hetaerae were female entertainers for *symposia*, drinking parties where poetry and song contests were held, and for family sacrificial rites. They were accustomed to speaking in front of men, and were adept in the art of repartee. Some were respected teachers and many are named in Greek literature. They enjoyed enviable and respected positions of wealth and were protected and taxed by the state.⁴

Conversely, married women were uneducated and lived secluded lives, raising children and managing their homes. Women were an exploited productive class and restricted in their property rights. The prevailing male-centered ethos of Greek culture reduced the value attached to women.⁵ Jewish women were much like their married Greek counterparts, uneducated and restricted to the home. Women were even relegated to a balcony in the synagogue.⁶ The “shame-honor culture” of Ephesus, exemplified by

the two-pronged cultural milieu in Jesus Ben Sirach's *Ecclesiasticus* gives further understanding to the social context of the Ephesian church: 1) Men feared that their own sexual attraction to women would result in loss of control, and 2) men feared that women's out-of-control sexuality would dishonor men. Women were viewed as over-determined symbols of male honor and manliness.⁷

Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:11 contained two primary pieces of information for the Ephesian church: 1) a radical and countercultural imperative that women learn, and 2) the *how* of their learning experience, i.e. “silence and submission.” What did Paul mean by “silence” and “submission”?

Paul's command in vs. 11 likely surprised the male Ephesian believers. C.S. Keener argues, “Given the bias against instructing women in the law, it is Paul's advocacy of their learning the law, not his recognition that they start as novices and so had to learn quietly, that was radical and countercultural.”⁸

Aida Spencer remarks, “Paul does not simply say that women ‘may learn’ or ‘should learn’ or that women should be ‘allowed to learn.’ Women must learn. Therefore they must be instructed and this departure from the cultural norm may be why Paul couches the word *manthanō*, which means “to learn,” in the present imperative active tense of the verb.”⁹

Gordon Fee takes a more relaxed view of this verse, suggesting that Paul was presupposing that women were already a part of public worship and were thus included in the instruction. Paul was not creating a new social position for women in vs. 11 because “the rest of the data in the NT makes it clear that had already happened among most Christians.”¹⁰

Paul completed his instruction that women must learn with a description of how they must learn, “in silence with full submission.” The word used in the beginning of chapter two to describe the kind of life Paul desired for the church was *hēsychios*, the same word he uses to describe

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how women should learn. *The New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionary* defines *hēsychios* as “stillness, quiet, a quiet fashion, or quietly.”¹¹

Philip Payne chooses “quietness” as the meaning for the word *hēsychia*, not “silence,” precisely because of Paul’s previous use of the word at the beginning of the chapter. According to Payne, Paul expresses a consistent desire for peace without trouble (2:2, 8, 11, 12, and 15) throughout the passage. Gordon Fee likewise agrees with the choice of quietness.¹²

Even if the English word “silence” is used for translation, it still modifies “learn.” “Learning in silence” defined the viewpoint of “rabbis and the early church fathers [who] deemed silence appropriate for rabbinical students, wise persons and even leaders.”¹³

Spencer elaborates, “Before, throughout and after Paul’s time, the rabbis were agreed that silence was an admirable attribute for the pious scholar.” Early church fathers such as Ignatius, third bishop of Antioch in Syria, and Clement of Alexandria wrote in support of the value of silent learning as well.¹⁴

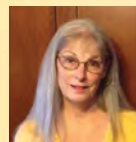
The addition of the prepositional phrase “with full submission” modifies the verb “learn” as well and is “synonymous with Paul’s other descriptive word, ‘in silence’ connoting an attitude of receptivity.”¹⁵ Payne agrees that the phrase modifies the verb “learn” and implies submission to the truths they were learning.¹⁶ Spencer proposes that the women “have not been silenced out of punishment but silenced out of conviction because their teachers are worthy of respect.”¹⁷

Though gender issues may have motivated Christians to argue with one another in the Ephesian congregation, it is clear that Paul is not addressing gender issues. Rather, he is defending the Ephesian church against false teaching by insisting that those who have been led astray, mostly women in this particular church, be taught sound doctrine, and that they learn theology quietly and respectfully from their teachers in line with the tranquil/peaceful life.

This verse is an instruction to the church to teach women and an admonition to the women on how to approach their task of learning with humility regarding their own lack of knowledge and respect toward teachers who knew more about the gospel than they, the women, did at that time. First Timothy 2:11 should not be interpreted as a universal principle for silencing women for all time nor should it be upheld as a universal directive requiring women to be submissive to men in Christian churches. Rather, both men and women are called to learn Scripture quietly and in full submission.

Notes

1. “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.” 1 Tim. 2:11 (NIV).
2. Andreas J. Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown* (B & H Academic, 2009), 642.
3. Stanley Grenz, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (InterVarsity Press, 1995), 126.
4. “Hetaira,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 07 Apr. 2012, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hetaira>; James Grout, “Hetairi,” *Encyclopaedia Romana*, February 11, 2012, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/greece/hetairai/hetairai.html.
5. “Ancient Greek Civilization.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25 Apr. 2012, <https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-greece>.
6. Aida Besancon Spencer, “Eve at Ephesus,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 17 (Fall, 1974), 215–222.
7. Claudia V. Camp, “Understanding Patriarchy: Women in Second Century Jerusalem Through the Eyes of Ben Sira,” *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, Amy Levine (Scholars Press, 1991), 38 “Ecclesiasticus.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.*, 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.
8. C. S. Keener and InterVarsity Press, “1 Ti 2:11,” in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 1993).
9. Aida Besancon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Baker Academic, 1989), 74.
10. Fee, 72.
11. Thomas, *Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries*.
12. Payne, 297; Fee, 72.
13. Grenz, 128.
14. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry*, 80.
15. Grenz, 128.
16. Payne, 316.
17. Spencer, 77.



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