

Paul's Concern for Ephesus: A Survey of 1 Timothy 2:8–15

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In the middle of 1 Timothy sit some of the Bible's most contested words about women. Historically, these verses have been wielded against women to address how they should dress, the authority they can have in the church and society, their place in the supposed creation hierarchy, and their role as mothers. However, such applications of this text tend to ignore the issues Paul is addressing and therefore misapply his instructions. Paul's concern about the situation in Ephesus is not that *women* or *men* are causing problems, but that the church's witness in the Ephesian community is at risk. In the city that was home to the cult of Artemis, false teachings were spreading and wealth was turning some people in the church away from the truth of the gospel. In 2:8–15, Paul instructs Timothy to respond to the specific ways men and women have let these false teachings affect their Christian lives. Paul's critique is instructive for the way all Christians are called to represent the truth of the gospel and to oppose anything contrary to the truth of the gospel. Focused on maintaining the church's witness in Ephesus, Paul urges Timothy to root out false teaching and its effects on the Christian community by encouraging peaceful prayer, humility in relation to wealth, increased education in the truth, and by confronting abusive authority.

Literary Context

1 Timothy, a letter that names Paul as its author, was likely written in the later years of his life (AD 62–67).¹ Paul is writing to his long-time ministry colleague, Timothy, whom he is urging to remain in Ephesus to handle the spread of false teaching that has arisen (1:3). In Paul's emotional farewell to the Ephesians in Acts 20, he had specifically warned them to be on guard against false teachings. Even so, he told them, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29–30 NIV). Now Paul's fears have come true. He skips his expected thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter, a standard element in most of his letters, including 2 Timothy, and jumps right into commanding Timothy to address the false teachings.² This is a pastoral letter of correction written to Timothy out of concern for a group of Paul's beloved congregations that have fallen prey to the "savage wolves."

Paul had been Timothy's mentor and friend for years, so this is a letter between close ministry colleagues addressing a matter of urgency. The tone of the letter is personal, not public. Such a letter would be the "least likely context for making transcendent statements that override the general application of Paul's teachings on spiritual gifts and leadership in the rest of the Pauline corpus."³ The highly personal nature of the letter helps

to account for linguistic and grammatical variations between this letter and Paul's other writings, explains missing contextual details, and underscores the specific nature of the letter.⁴ Therefore, it is helpful to read this letter with Paul's several others in mind to give us deeper insight into his theology and how he is applying his theology in this letter.

Scholars have attempted to place 2:8–15 within a category of Paul's writings, often connecting these verses with the household codes (Eph 5:21–6:9, Col 3:18–4:1, cf. 1 Pet 3:1–7). While "man/men" (*anēr/andres*, 2:8, 12) and "woman/women" (*gunē/gunaiikes*, 2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14) can also be translated "husband(s)" and "wife/wives," as would be expected in the household codes, Paul is addressing widows and women who are resisting marriage; certainly, Paul is speaking about these particular women. Still, the passage is structured in a similar way to the household codes, with instructions for both men and women:

- A. Instruction for men regarding prayer
- B. Instruction for women
 - i. Regarding prayer
 - ii. Regarding education and authority

However, Paul is not addressing the household here. He is addressing the church as a household, focusing on its mission and public witness in response to the increased false teachings spreading among the church community. The central theme of this passage is right conduct in worship. Men are stirring up anger and disputes, and women are flaunting their wealth and being disruptive in worship.⁵ Such things are not "advancing God's work" (1:4b). This chief concern leads to the following instructions Paul gives Timothy for the community.

Historical Context

As explained above, the central concern of this letter is the false teachings spreading in the Ephesian church. Almost every verse is related to how Timothy can root out its influence in the church community.⁶ While it is challenging to determine what exactly these false teachings are, the letter does offer us some clues. The teachings forbade marriage and eating certain foods (4:3) and taught that godliness "is a means to financial gain" (6:5). Several scholars link these false teachings to an over-realized eschatology.⁷ Wealthy widows in particular seem to have been attracted to these teachings because the teachings "affirmed . . . that they were already in the ideal (eschatological) state of being single before Christ. It proclaimed an exalted status for women and a freedom from the obligation of marriage."⁸ The widows found freedom in these false teachings because they validated their unmarried status and their wealth. Not only were certain widows targets and adopters of these false teachings, but they were also among the ones spreading the teachings throughout

the church. They were going house to house “talking nonsense” (5:13),⁹ and because the women were falling for these teachings, they had “turned away to follow Satan” (5:15). The false teachings, however, are only one contextual component at play in the problems arising in the church community.

Ephesus was also the center of the cult of Artemis, the Greek goddess of chastity and childbirth, and her followers turned to her for help to get through childbirth safely. In fact, “Artemis is regarded as the savior of laboring women.”¹⁰ Part of her myth is her superiority over men which stirred up similar sentiments in her followers.¹¹ Her cult was so important to the culture of Ephesus that Luke reports a riot breaking out in the city over the fear that Paul’s message of the gospel would discredit Artemis (Acts 19:23–40). They were concerned she would be “robbed of her divine majesty” (v. 27), so the crowds chanted “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” for hours (v. 28). From the onset of the gospel reaching Ephesus there was conflict between the truth of the gospel and myths surrounding Artemis.

In addition to Greek influence, including the cult of Artemis, Ephesus was a province of Rome. The city was greatly influenced by Roman culture and was a wealthy hub of trade and travel. Because of this, the “new Roman woman” phenomenon likely spread there. The “new Roman woman” was a “sexual revolution” of sorts among Roman women.¹² While, in the Greco-Roman world, women could not officially exercise authority in the public sphere, in practice, this was starting to change during the time of the NT.¹³ Roman women had more freedom than most other women to have roles in the public sphere, so they influenced the culture of other women in society. This was predominantly true for wealthy women because “financial security gave them power to act independently.”¹⁴ Wearing elaborate hairstyles, gold, pearls, and expensive clothing (2:9) were fashions of this “new Roman woman” trend. Wealthy Christian women seem to have been affected by this and were beginning to follow the trends they saw in broader society, changing their dress and exploring their freedom.

Verse-by-Verse Survey

Right before the verses at hand, Paul appeals to the church to pray for all people, whom God wants to be saved (2:1–4). He wants all people “to come to a knowledge of the truth” (2:4b). Paul is concerned about people who have strayed from the truth of the gospel. Longing for the community to live in peace and to be people of prayer, he addresses specific ways these ideals are not being lived out within the community.

Instructions for Men Regarding Prayer (2:8)

Paul wants men to pray without anger or disputes, both of which go against his urging for peace within the community. Instead, they should lift up holy hands, a posture related to one’s holiness in life and attitude toward others. Graham Simpson points out that “the uplifted hand can be holy only if one’s heart is holy and one’s conduct is holy.”¹⁵ They must be in right relationship with God and with others before turning to God in prayer. Holy hands are also related to a tradition of extending hands to bless

one another or to ask for God’s intervention in a situation.¹⁶ The false teaching had stirred up disputes and anger, but instead of turning to one another in anger, Paul urges them to bless one another and pray for God’s intervention. They should seek God in their disputes because harboring anger or stirring up conflicts would affect their ability to pray for the salvation of all people. In doing so, they can model the truth of God’s peacefulness.

Instructions for Women (2:9–15)

Because of the Ephesian context and the nature of the false teachings, Paul devotes a much larger section, compared to v. 8’s instruction to men, addressing how the women are behaving. There is debate among scholars regarding the connection between these instructions for men and women. While Paul does not explicitly connect the instructions for women to the issue of prayer, it seems likely that he is still addressing conduct in prayer.¹⁷ To continue addressing prayer is in line with Paul’s overall concern of praying for the salvation of all people. Therefore, Paul has guidelines for them in response to the cultural issues affecting their community.

While anger and disputes were hindering the prayers of the men, Paul also gives prayer instructions regarding women. The problem for the women is pride and wealth. Because these verses are addressing how women should dress and the word translated as “modestly” is used, the sexual promiscuity of women is often read into the text here. However, two important points about these verses make it clear that Paul’s primary concern is how pride and wealth, not promiscuity, are hindering the prayers and public witness of the women.

First, Paul tells the women to dress modestly (*aidous*). This Greek word, like a few others in this chapter, only appears in the NT here. While this makes defining the word challenging enough, the word also plays almost no role in early Christian writings.¹⁸ In other contemporary Greek literature, the word is used to describe reverence before a god or dignitary, and it is related to presenting oneself respectably. In this sense, it expresses humility in relation to others. However, it can also describe a person’s habits or attitudes toward oneself, their “disposition of the soul.” While it later came to be linked to shamefulness, it is best understood as having a right view of oneself, neither too important nor too insignificant. To be sure, *aidous* describes one’s inner disposition, focused on how one views oneself and presents oneself to others. In Roman culture, clothing and personal values were linked.¹⁹ Therefore, Paul wants the women to dress in a way that best reflects their inner dispositions and values.

Secondly, Paul addresses more specifically how the women have been presenting themselves and how he desires them to present themselves instead. Paul names the specific ways women were dressing that were a problem: braided hair, gold, pearls, and expensive clothing. All of these are related to the “new Roman woman” and are signals of wealth. Paul is clearly not addressing all women, but only certain wealthy women, who were likely a minority in the church community. Therefore, this is in no way

a mandate for all women everywhere to dress in a certain way to combat sexual promiscuity; this is a critique against flaunting wealth or dressing in a way that does not reflect one's Christian values. Simpson highlights this point as he applies this verse to his context in India: "in appearance-conscious societies such as India, this is an important lesson for a believing man also."²⁰ The same could be said of the appearance-conscious United States and various other cultures around the world. Paul is imploring wealthy Christian women not to pridefully display their wealth. Instead, he urges the women to have a modest view of themselves and to present themselves "with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God" (2:10 NIV).

Paul turns next to combatting the false teachings in the church through the education of women. Verse 11 is the only command in the passage: "Let a woman *learn* [*manthanetō*] in quietness and all submission." The verses that follow explain this command. Paul wants women to be educated and to be good students. In this context, a good student—whether male or female—is a quiet one, "waiting to be filled up with the knowledge of the teacher."²¹ The women have not been filled up with the knowledge of the truth (Paul's prayer in 2:4), so they have been susceptible to false teachings. The solution is for women to be educated in the truth of the faith and to submit to this truth. What, after all, is the best way to combat false teachings but with learning the truth?

Paul gives similar instructions to women in 1 Cor 14:34–35. Ben Witherington, noting the strong linguistic parallels between these passages, sees the 1 Timothy text as a development of the 1 Corinthians passage.²² Women should learn (variations of the same verb are used in both passages; see 1 Cor 14:31, 35) sound teaching and they should be quiet, submissive learners.²³ In 1 Cor 14, Paul is not barring women from ever speaking (just a few chapters before in 11:5 he gives instruction to women who are prophesying and praying); instead, he is prohibiting disruptive speech. He uses the same imperative, "let them be silent [*sigatōsan*]," three times in 14:26–40: to instruct those speaking in tongues without an interpreter (v. 28), to a person who is speaking if another person has a revelation (v. 30), and to women who are asking questions during the worship gathering (v. 34). In a similar way, in 1 Timothy Paul is prohibiting disruptive speech, namely false teaching, and certain women have been among those causing the disruption. Therefore, Paul wants them to be quiet while they submissively learn the truth.

Paul is hoping to combat the spread of false teaching through women being educated in the truth, and by not permitting them *authentēin*, translated in the NIV as "to assume authority" over men (2:12). First Timothy 2:12 is the most contentious verse of the passage, with every word having been dissected in scrutiny and whole books written on its implications. The main issue hinges on the meaning of *authentēin* and, based on its meaning, the specificity or the timelessness of the prohibition given.

Authentēin is another word in this passage that only occurs here in the NT. In fact, it is the first known occurrence of the verb form of this word in Greek.²⁴ This makes defining the word incredibly challenging. There are several other words for

authority Paul could have used. For example, he uses a different word in 2:2 to talk about praying for people in positions of authority (*huperochē*), so in 2:12, Paul is certainly talking about something different than a position of authority. Why would Paul use a word that is so unique, not only in his own writing but in contemporary literature? Where the word is found in other literature it generally has a negative connotation and is used in relation to activities initiated by oneself.²⁵ The original meaning could mean something like "to do or to originate something with one's own hand"²⁶ or to be self-achieving.²⁷ It is used elsewhere to describe a murderer or a perpetrator of a crime, and it often has a connotation of domination or being dictatorial.²⁸ Linda Belleville concludes that "there is no first-century warrant for translating *authentēin* as 'to exercise authority'" (how the word is translated in the ESV, NASB, and NET).²⁹ In its later use, the word has a variety of meanings, but the recipient of the action is always harmed or forced against their will.³⁰ Therefore, "interpreting [*authentēin*] as if it describes servant leadership and pastoral care is misleading in the extreme."³¹ In short, it is an abuse of power. To be clear, just because Paul is prohibiting women from acting this way does not mean it is permissible for men to act this way. This is a negative use of authority by any person.

Paul is not permitting women to exercise *abusive* authority over men.³² It is here that understanding the cultural context of Ephesus is critical. The cult of Artemis reinforced the idea that women are superior to men and the "new Roman woman" phenomenon was encouraging wealthy women to seek independence, allowing them access to positions of power in society. Both influences were likely leading to uneducated women taking on self-appointed roles, through which they were spreading false teachings that were continuing to validate the way they were living. Therefore, Paul is not prohibiting *women* from having authority; Paul is prohibiting the kind of abusive authority that exists at the intersection of gender hierarchies, wealth, ease of access to power, and the spread of self-validating false teachings. In the Ephesian church at this time, it happened to be women who were exercising this kind of leadership. Philip Towner rightly argues that "under different circumstances the experiment of women, according to giftedness, taking on more and more roles within the church could have continued were it not for the combined detrimental effects of the heresy and the emerging controversial trend among wealthy women."³³ Understood in this light, the question is not about whether this prohibition universally applies to women but whether we take this prohibition seriously for all forms of abusive leadership in the church.

In 2:13–15, Eve becomes Paul's example of how harmful false teachings are and how easily one can become deceived by such teachings. Women in the church were turning from truth to follow Satan (5:15), so Paul uses the most famous example of a woman being deceived to convey the gravity of what is at risk should these women continue having authority to spread their false teachings. Walter Kaiser argues that the reference to Adam and Eve being formed is not about creation order but

about education (formation) since Adam was with God in the garden and received the command about not eating from the tree before Eve was formed.³⁴ This interpretation fits well with Paul emphasizing that it was Eve who was deceived, if deception is seen as the antithesis of education. Lack of education in the truth makes one prone to being deceived by false teachings.

However, this reference to the creation account could also be a response to the abusive power being displayed by the women. Towner sees the creation reference as a direct response to the competing cultural influences.³⁵ Paul wants Timothy to remind these women that the woman, Eve, was formed second and was the one deceived. This is in no way to assert male dominance but to remind these women that God's intention is not for women to be dominant either. After all, Paul had already written to the Ephesian church explaining his model of marriage. It is not about either husband or wife dominating the other; they must submit to one another (Eph 5:21).

Following the verses reminding women that it was a woman who was first deceived, Paul also reminds women about their salvation (2:15). Eve had fallen into transgression, but she will be saved (*sōthēsetai*, a singular verb, not plural as in the CEV, NASB, NIV, etc.). The challenging part of this verse is what follows: she will be saved through the childbearing/childbirth (*tēs teknogonias*). This is yet another word in this passage that only appears here in the NT. Where it is found in contemporary Greek literature, it is referring to childbirth, meaning the event of birth and not the process of raising children.³⁶ How, then, is childbirth connected to the salvation of Eve and women?

It is worth noting that *teknogonias* has an article before it (“the childbirth”). This has led many scholars to connect the childbirth with the birth of Jesus and the *protoevangelium* (“first-gospel”) in Gen 3:15–16. Jesus is the child born of a woman who has crushed the head of the serpent and saved us all from the sin of Adam and Eve. Through this, Paul is reframing the eschatological hopes of the women who are following the false teachings because “Mary’s childbearing will save Eve in an eschatological sense and thus all women in and through Christ.”³⁷ Might this, then, be a contextualization of the gospel for women who had turned to false teachings and have a history of relying on Artemis to be their savior, particularly during childbirth?³⁸ Paul is reminding them of the gospel. Even those who, like Eve, have been deceived are saved through Christ.

Conclusion

Amid his beloved church’s struggles to navigate their complex cultural waters, Paul’s central concern is the same as in his other letters. He wants the Christian community to live in a way that reflects the gospel well and to root out anything contrary to the truth of the gospel. This larger view of Paul’s concern puts his instructions to Timothy for men and women in their proper context, consistent with the rest of Paul’s ministry. Paul worked alongside women throughout his mission to spread the gospel, praising them for their ministry, commissioning them to deliver and read his letters to others, and entrusting them as leaders

of the churches he began (e.g., Rom 16:1–16). Of particular relevance to understanding 1 Timothy is Priscilla, a leader of the church in *Ephesus* (Acts 18:18–26, 2 Tim 4:19). Women were proclaiming the gospel—in fact were the first proclaimers of the gospel (Matt 28:8–10, Luke 24:9–11, John 20:18)—and Paul continues to see them as vital to his mission. Paul does not want fewer people proclaiming the gospel; he wants more to proclaim the truth so that all people might be saved. How ought women and men today live in order to fulfill this mission of all people knowing salvation?

The temptation as we read these verses in 1 Timothy is to let the gender-specific phrasing of the instructions guide how we apply them to our lives, seeing the instructions for men as just for men and those for women as just for women. However, I propose that we read these verses as instructions for how the whole Christian community might reflect the gospel well and root out anything contrary to the truth of the gospel. After all, the issues being addressed by Paul are problems any person could perpetuate in the church.

These verses call Christians to examine how we are representing the gospel, particularly in our attitudes and postures during worship. We are challenged to turn to God in times of disputes instead of turning to one another in anger. The way that we deal with conflict reveals the postures of our hearts. Similarly, Paul confronts us with the reality of wealth disparities in our church communities and warns against flaunting our wealth. Instead, we are called to think neither too highly of ourselves nor too little. The way we present ourselves should reflect our inward posture of humility before God.

Paul also instructs us to examine how false teachings are perpetuated in our churches and offers two important ways we can combat such teachings: education in the truth and confronting abusive leadership in the church. Regarding education, this looks like offering accessible biblical training and spaces for ongoing theological reflection, especially for those who have historically not been given such opportunities. However, this also looks like evaluating those from whom we are learning. Who are the truth tellers in our midst? The people in power are not always, and in fact many times are not, the ones speaking the truth. Finally, Paul urges us to confront and root out abusive leadership in the church wherever we find it. Doing so will allow space for leaders who seek to shepherd those in their care the way that Paul cares for the church in *Ephesus*.

While Paul is addressing a specific situation in the church of *Ephesus*, the guidance he gives Timothy is instructive for the church today. Influenced by the cult of Artemis, the “new Roman woman,” and the nature of the false teachings, certain women—particularly wealthy women—were perpetuating problems in the church, including the continued spread of the false teachings. In 1 Timothy, Paul addresses his concerns about the church’s mission and public witness in the city and gives Timothy instructions for rooting out the spread of false teachings. Through this, Paul calls the church to be people of peace and prayer so that through their witness all people will come to know the truth of the gospel.

Notes

1. While there are scholars who question if Paul is the author of 1 Timothy, and therefore find the authority of these words suspect altogether, for the sake of this paper, I will assume that Paul did write 1 Timothy. See for example Annette Bourland Huizenga, *1–2 Timothy, Titus*, Wisdom Commentary 53 (Liturgical, 2016) xlv–xlvii.
2. Linda L. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority: 1 Timothy 2:11–15,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, 2nd ed. (InterVarsity, 2005) 206.
3. Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016) 297.
4. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 284.
5. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 207. For the view that this passage is not aimed at worship settings, see Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 286–90.
6. Philip Barton Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Zondervan, 2009) 296.
7. Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 2006) 197.
8. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 302.
9. Unlike most translations, NIV reads “nonsense” here in 5:13. For a discussion of translating the word in question, *phluaroi*, see Andrew Bartlett, “Worst Translations: All in One,” *CT* (Oct 30, 2020) §3, <https://christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/october/worst-translations-all-in-one.html>.
10. Dorothy A. Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership* (Baker Academic, 2021) 111.
11. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 219.
12. Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Eerdmans, 2003) 21. See also Towner, *Letters*, 196.
13. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 260–62.
14. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 22.
15. Graham Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles: 1–2 Timothy, Titus: An Exegetical and Contextual Commentary*, India Commentary on the New Testament (Fortress, 2017) 48.
16. Towner, *Letters*, 202.
17. Walter C. Kaiser, “Correcting Caricatures: Biblical Teaching on Women,” *Priscilla Papers* 19/2 (Spring 2005) 8; Frank Ritchel Ames and Jeffrey D. Miller, “Prayer and Syncretism in 1 Timothy,” *ResQ* 52/2 (2010) 65–80; reprinted as ch. 8 in *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives*, vol. 2, ed. Elizabeth A. McCabe (University Press of America, 2011) 94–111.
18. Rudolf Bultmann, Αἰδώς, *TDNT* 1:171.
19. *TDNT* 1:169; Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 101.
20. Simpson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 49.
21. Huizenga, *1–2 Timothy, Titus*, 25.
22. Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, SNTSMS (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 117.
23. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 306.
24. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 290.
25. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 363.
26. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 212.
27. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 363.
28. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 212.
29. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 216.

30. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 292.

31. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 294. On *authentēin*, see further Jamin Hübner, “Translating αὐθεντέω (*authentēō*) in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Priscilla Papers* 29/2 (Spring 2015) 16–26; Cynthia Long Westfall, “The Meaning of αὐθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *JGRChJ* 10 (2014) 138–73.

32. Witherington argues that one of the key issues Paul is correcting in 2:8–15 is abuse in worship; Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 119.

33. Towner, *Letters*, 200.

34. Kaiser, “Correcting Caricatures,” 9.

35. Towner, *Letters*, 228–32.

36. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 433.

37. Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament*, 111.

38. See Ames and Miller, “Prayer and Syncretism in 1 Timothy.”

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