

Essay 3: 1 Timothy 2 and Headship

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This is the third of a series of essays reflecting on biblical passages related to the debate over male headship and questions of ordaining women as elders and pastors. My focus will be the final text involving submission and women in the New Testament (NT), 1 Tim 2:11-12. Here we have a noun from the same root as the verb (*hupotasso*) which we examined in essay two. In English, the text in question reads as follows:

1 Timothy 2:11-15 (ESV): 11 Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve; 14 and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. 15 Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

In my experience, advocates of the Gender Exclusive (GE) position (i.e. women are excluded from ordination) explain this text along the following lines. The “plain reading” of 1 Tim 2:11-12 teaches that women are not to have spiritual authority over men. The language is asserted to be self-evidentially clear. They further assert that in verse 13, Paul grounds this admonition in “the creation order.” Adam’s being formed first means he was given spiritual headship over Eve and this, in turn, means that men are assigned a position of spiritual headship over women.

While it is indisputable that in 1 Tim 2:13, Paul gives reasons undergirding the commands in 2:11-12, the reality is that Paul merely states two raw facts without explanation. Fact 1, “Adam was formed first, then Eve.” Fact 2, “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived.” Paul gives no explanation of these facts, nor does he explicate how they support his previous commands. He simply states them with an apparent confidence that he and Timothy share a common understanding of the theological meaning of these two facts, and hence assumes Timothy will understand the point.

What this means is that *any* proposed explanation of Fact 1 or Fact 2 is *the expositor’s interpretation* of those facts, not Paul’s. Thus, any theological rationale derived from verse 13 is supplied by the interpreter, not by Paul. If, however, the expositor’s interpretation is not differentiated from what Paul actually said, the expositor’s *opinion* becomes equated with Paul’s. In such a case, human opinion becomes unwittingly invested with Paul’s canonical authority, transforming that opinion into a quasi-Paul. Quasi-Paul is then used as a divinely inspired authority to interpret other biblical passages (such as verses 11-12 and Gen 2). Thus, the

expositor's opinion becomes invested with magisterial power over the Scriptures to define biblical truth.

I cannot in good conscience recognize quasi-Paul as a divinely inspired authority. To recognize quasi-Paul in this manner would mean that humans can impose their authority over the biblical text, able to manipulate it to suit their ideological agendas. The fact remains that Paul does not explain his statement, and any claim that Paul is invoking some kind of a creation order is a personal interpretation which, if used to determine the meaning of other scriptures, elevates the interpreter above the text.

I do not believe that quasi-Paul is intentionally or maliciously invented. In fact, I believe that GE advocates are sincerely attempting to uphold the authority of the biblical text. Holy zeal, however, easily leads to sloppiness in method, causing cherished ideology to unwittingly insulate the expositor from discerning that human interpretation has been elevated to the level of Scripture. Again, I affirm the GE advocates intend no foul play with the text. Nevertheless, quasi-Paul has unwittingly achieved canonical authority and has tremendous influence on discussions of several texts. Such problems make me question if this "plain reading" of 1 Tim 2:11-12 may be more of a superficial reading than a plain one. It behooves us to reexamine the text.

A "plain reading" should first observe the context in which the text appears. Paul, of course, is giving practical counsel to Timothy on how to manage various situations in the churches under his care. Many commentators see 1 Timothy as an early form of church manual, spelling out policies for various situations Timothy may face. 1 Tim 2:11-12 would be part of a policy set starting in 1 Tim 2:8. Paul starts with counsel for "men" (plural in Greek) to pray, "lifting holy hands without quarreling." This would appear to depict the church in public worship, partly due to the plurality of "men," and the activity depicted, jointly praying together. Immediately following is a lengthier injunction to women (again plural) concerning modesty in dress and conduct. Since this section is in parallel with the section for the "men" it is also likely addressing conduct during the public worship service.¹ So we appear to have general counsels given, respectively, to all the church's men and all the church's women, addressing conduct in public worship.

In 1 Tim 2:11, Paul makes an interesting grammatical shift, switching from the plural forms of "men" and "women," to the indefinite singular forms of "a woman" and "a man." This stylistic change signals the reader that one is entering a third section distinct from the first two.

¹While I have not yet addressed 1 Cor 11 in my essays, the head covering controversy there suggests women could bring public disgrace on the church by being improperly attired. So the call to modesty in dress here in 1 Tim seems to fit into the 1 Cor 11 pattern of calling women to avoiding causing some kind of public reproach through immodest dress and adornment. Unlike 1 Cor, however, here Paul does not specify the exact concerns underlying this policy. My point is that 1 Cor 11 gives us a plausible reason to conclude this charge to the women is in the context of public worship like the section on the men.

What might the change to indefinite singular forms suggest?

The use of indefinite singular forms suggests this section is not counsel directed to all the women and all the men. There is some kind of situation involving *a* woman in an inappropriate interaction with *a* man, at church, in public. Paul is not addressing a specific woman and man, but seems to address a specific *kind* of public interaction between some individual woman and some individual man, where any woman or any man could be entangled in the questionable dynamic.

“Let a woman learn.” This phrase defines the situation being addressed. It is the language of instruction and schooling. This sense of didactic context is reinforced by verse 12 where this woman is forbidden to teach. We are thus dealing with some kind of teacher-pupil interaction in the public life of the church. This educational theme is further reinforced by Paul’s instructions regulating teaching in the church in 1 Tim 1.

In 1 Tim 1:3, Paul commands Timothy to stop those who “teach differently” (*heterodidaskaleo*).² In the ensuing verses, Paul laments the influence of these unorthodox teachers, citing their desire to argue over genealogies and other speculations (verses 4 and 6). Paul then describes these unorthodox teachers as “desiring to be teachers of the law.” Because they do not know what they are talking about (verse 7), these unorthodox instructors are thus incompetent to teach.

The term “teacher of the law” (*nomodidaskalos*)³ is important for solidifying the type of situation being addressed. This compound word is a rare term, used only two other places in the NT (Luke 5:17; Acts 5:34). In each case, Luke uses the term to depict officially recognized teachers in Judaism. Furthermore, teaching is a major activity of believers in Acts, and was a central feature of the early church’s ministry. Paul thus seems to use the term “teacher of the law” to designate officially recognized teachers in the church. This sense of official recognition is reinforced by that fact that the unorthodox teachers desire to fill this authorized position (1 Tim 1:7). Thus it seems that in 1 Tim 2, we have a woman (an impersonal representation of various individuals), who is supposed to be learning from the officially recognized teacher.

We continue in 1 Tim 2:11. This woman is not only commanded to learn but she is told *how* she should learn: “quietly with all submissiveness.” The Greek word for “quietly” (*hesuxia*,

²This word is used only twice in the NT, with both occurrences in 1 Tim (1:3 and 6:3). It is a compound word combining two Greek words. First, *heteros*, which means “another of a differing kind.” Paul chastised the Galatians for receiving “another [*heteros*] Gospel” differing from the one he had taught them. In the context of teaching and preaching the Gospel, it thus has overtones of unorthodoxy. The second word is rooted in *didaskalos*, a teacher. From the Greek root underlying *didaskalos*, we get the English word, *didactic*.

³This is also a compound word like in footnote 2, with *nomos* meaning “law.”

along with its cognate forms) generally connotes more a sense of peacefulness and non-contention than a meaning of full silence. For example, 2 Thes 3:12 exhorts believers to “do their work *quietly* and earn their own living.” Understanding “quietly” (*hesuxia*) as having this non-contentious nuance instead of as a call to utter silence fits well with the context of Paul’s counsel to the men in 2:8 to pray without quarreling. By not learning peacefully, the woman in question may be contributing to a contentious spirit in the public life of the church. This non-contentious nuance is reinforced by the fact this woman is also to learn “with all submissiveness” (*hupotage*, the noun form of *hupotasso*, studied in the previous essay). Note that she is to be in a state of submissiveness parallel to being in a condition of peaceful quietness. In the literary context of this passage, the woman would be submitting to the larger church order in the setting of public worship by avoiding public contention. This would be similar the women in 1 Cor 14 (see Essay 2) who submit to those speaking in the worship service by being quiet. In the immediate context, her submission to the church’s order means to submit to the officially recognized teacher and not cause trouble.

The idea that this woman should submit to the official church teacher is reinforced by the prohibition in verse 12. “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet” (*hesuxia*). Here we come to the crux of the matter. This woman, instead of submitting to the teacher, was trying to teach the teacher, who happens to be a man. She is an example of those described in 1 Tim 1 who desire to be a teacher of the law (officially recognized by the church), but does not know what she is talking about. Because of her incompetence, she is not to attempt to teach, and even more, she is not to clash with the recognized teacher. She needs to first learn before she can think about teaching. Since the solution to her problem is to be a good learner, this suggests that the prohibition on her teaching is due to her lack of learning.

The statement that a woman is not permitted “to exercise authority over a man” reinforces the sense of contention with the recognized teacher. This English phrase—“to exercise authority over”—renders one Greek word, *authentein*, the infinitive form of *authenteo*.⁴ Since this is the sole place in the NT and Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) where any form of *authenteo* is used, we have no means of comparing *authentein* with other biblical passages so we can better understand its meaning in a purely biblical context. Scholarly studies of extra-biblical usage suggest this word connotes a domineering or violent exercise of authority. Hence, the KJV translation states that the woman is not to “usurp authority” – forcefully take it– over the man. The dominance-violence meaning well fits the context of 1 Tim 2, where Paul is calling for a peaceful, noncontentious public worship service. In other words, Paul is addressing a situation Timothy might face in which a woman attempts to take over the class and dominate the official teacher, usurping his function as a “teacher of the law.” For these reasons, I believe that a good translation is, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to dominate a man.”

Additionally, we observe, “man” here is indefinite like woman. Paul indicates no

⁴The English word, “authentic,” and its related forms derive from *authenteo*.

particular man, nor all men. Contextually, this man is inferred to be the teacher. Public order demands students do not try to challenge and dominate the church-sanctioned teacher. On this basis, then, Paul says he does not permit a woman to teach or dominate the male teacher. Like the incompetent teachers of chapter 1, she needs to be learner, not a teacher. Thus, she is to be submissive and non-combative (“quiet”) in her public interactions with the authorized teacher. The whole context thus favors reading this passage as addressing the need to be orderly in public worship, and particularly to treat church-sanctioned teachers with respect. Sabbath School is not meant to be a platform for promoting personal theological agendas, especially through arguing with the teacher. In short, the submission here is much like what we saw in 1 Cor 14 (see Essay 2), a submission to church order and the speaker and is not suited to building a doctrine of general male authority over female.

In verse 13, we turn to Paul’s stated reasons why a woman ought not to domineer the male teacher, namely Fact 1 and Fact 2 as mentioned above. While Paul does not explain the meaning of these two facts, it is clear that Fact 1 alludes to the creation story in Gen 2. The “creation order”/headship explanation of this phrase, proposed by the GE expositor, is one possible way to interpret Paul’s appeal to Gen 2. However, Paul’s statement does not *require* that particular interpretation. There can be other equally viable interpretations of this text. I thus need more than just someone’s assertion as to what Paul means by what he says.

There are good arguments favoring the idea that Gen 2 continues to express the equality of gender depicted in Gen 1. In Gen 1, this equality is depicted by man and woman jointly assigned to exercise dominion over nature without differentiation of tasks and roles between them. Gen 2 can easily be understood as further developing the egalitarian theme launched in the previous chapter.⁵ From this alternative perspective, Paul appeals to a “creation order” from Gen 2 in which the woman was made to be man’s colleague, not his boss. By trying to dominate the male teacher, the argumentative woman violates the collegial purpose for which she was created, and would thus be acting contrary to Christ’s creation order. Jesus forbade the disciples from practicing the Gentile concept of hierarchal power (*katexousiazō*) in the church. Instead, he urged, “it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). A woman trying to *authentēin* a man (or vice versa) seems more akin to the Gentile model of authority than Christ’s.

Paul offers a second justification for why a woman is not to domineer (*authentēin*) the teacher. “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor”

⁵I cannot here delve into Gen 2, but will say this. While GE advocates appeal to four features in Gen 2 as evidence of a pre-fall creation order placing males in headship over females. However, the “facts” cited do not require the GE interpretation. Factors mitigating against the GE interpretation of Gen 2 include, three of the alleged “facts” are dubious at best, false at worst. My perception is that these “facts” are interpreted in the light of quasi-Paul, now unwittingly creating a quasi-Moses. I am not convinced that the GE position can be extracted fairly from the text without the influence of these two quasi-biblical influences.

(1 Timothy 2:14). Eve did not listen submissively to her teacher, whom she cites as God (Gen 3:3). She appears to have tried to handle the situation on her own, not recognizing her lack of qualifications to argue with the serpent (Gen 3:4-6). Had she learned submissively from God and recognized her limits, she would not have been deceived. By contrast, Adam's sin was not rooted in being deceived by the snake like Eve. Thus Paul appears to use Eve as an object lesson of a woman who did not recognize her lack of qualifications, who did not learn what she was supposed to learn, and whose ignorant influence enticed a man (Adam) to make a cold, calculated decision to join her in sinning. The logic is obvious. A woman should not try to instruct her male teacher while she, like Eve, has not sufficiently learned. Such a woman is not qualified to bring a positive collegial influence in interactions with her male teacher. Thus, a woman should first learn and gain the qualifications to enter into collegial discussion, before engaging in dialogue with the teacher.

I would expect that GE advocates will make much of the fact that the teacher in 1 Tim 2-11-12 is male. That the teacher here is male, however, does not logically entail that all teachers must be male. The woman is not prohibited from exercising authority (*exousia*) towards a man. She is only prohibited from domineering (*authentain*) a man. In surveying all uses of *exousia* in the Bible, I find no place in Scripture where *exousia* is restricted by any stated policy to the male gender. *Exousia* ultimately comes from God (John 19:11; Rom 13:1) and all *exousia* has been given to Christ (MT 28:18). Since *all* authority (*exousia*) belongs to Christ, then there is no inherent authority in human persons, genders, or church offices. Christ the family head can appoint any of his children to any position in the church because all human expressions of authority are contingent on Christ's authority and will (see Essay 1).

A plain, contextual reading of 1 Tim 2, in my view, does not provide unambiguous support for the "creation order" interpretation proposed by GE interpreters. While the GE view offers *one* possible explanation, which has a basic logic to it, the text does not logically entail that specific interpretation and, in fact, has evidence capable of supporting compelling alternatives. Additionally, I find the GE explication of Fact 1 problematic because it seems to elevate the GE expositor's interpretation of verse 13 to canonical status. A quasi-Paul is unwittingly created and is then used as an "inspired commentary" to interpret other canonical passages. Human opinion becomes invested with magisterial authority over the biblical text. I believe a contextually sensitive plain reading produces a radically different picture than that provided by what seems to me to be a superficial and simplistic reading of the text which unwittingly creates a quasi-Paul. Paul appears to be instructing Timothy on how to handle a small core of unruly women who try to dominate and argue with official church teachers. We certainly can all agree that individuals ought not to create a disturbance in Sabbath School or other public meetings of the Church, dominating the recognized speaker in order to advocate personal theological agendas.

P.S.

Verse 15 is much debated, but seems not to be a theological factor grounding the policy of verses 11-12. I have not seen a fully convincing proposal to this point in my investigation. This verse, along with portions of 1 Cor 11, seem to hint that some kind theology based on Eve was floating around the churches of that era. This apparent Eve theology was producing fruits of unruly behavior in the public worship in both 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2. (In 1 Cor 14 and its unruly women, we are likely seeing the fruit of Eve theology from 1 Cor 11). The biblical text itself leaves us in the dark on the exact dynamics being addressed, but the black-and-white picture formed by the text points us towards the idea that unruly behavior in the public life of the church is not acceptable. We can all agree on this.

We might be able to add some color to this picture through relatively recent discoveries about Gnostic teachings. We have evidences of Paul addressing other Gnostic teachings such as Docetism in 1 Cor 12:3. It is now known that some Christian Gnostics had a strong theology of Eve. Based on Eve being called the mother of all living (in Gen), it was apparently taught that Eve was the progenitor of Adam. This reversal was apparently used to teach a female dominance over men (which would threaten the Gen 3:16 prescription for post-fall marriage relations), and that women should not have babies as this diffused and divided the divine spark in each of us among more material beings. Presuming the accuracy of these discoveries, they may help clarify the context for Paul's admonitions for women to bear children and submit to their husbands as seen in Essay 2. Since childbirth was a major killer of women, perhaps 1 Tim 2:15 was a way of assuring women that birthing children did not endanger their salvation as implied by the Gnostics. What does seem clear is that verse 15 does not seem integral to the argument of verses 11-14, but seems to add some kind of reassurance that women are not excluded from Salvation based on the Adam-Eve relationship.