

## **Does God's Word prohibit women from being in pastoral leadership in a church?**

This is the question we are going to put to the Scriptures in this article. It is a vitally important question and increasingly so since the culture of our day answers it with a very firm, unanimously and obvious 'No!' Should we agree with this answer, or disagree? Whatever answer Christians will give, they need to echo what God has said in his Word. If we seek to answer as Christians based on the Scriptures, I believe we need to consider one very important text that addresses our question. I will leave my own answer to the end of this article, but will hopefully help you make your own reply based on the Word of God.

I believe that God speaks in Scripture and that what he did and does say through the apostle Paul should determine our answer to this urgent question. The divine revelation given to us by God on this question can be found in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Let's turn to this Scripture, in the New Revised Standard Version, and listen in on how the apostle Paul instructs Timothy on certain matters relating to the Ephesian church:

*"I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty".*

### **Apostolic Words**

Before we pay close attention to these very forthright words of Paul, it may be needful for the benefit of some to clarify the status of these words for us today. What function should they have in determining our 21<sup>st</sup> century question as to what women can or cannot do in matters of church leadership? I believe a satisfactory answer needs to be rooted in knowing *who* gave these instructions. If we back up to the verse immediately preceding the words above (2:7), we see that Paul identifies himself as *a divinely designated herald and apostle authorized by God and Christ to teach the Gentiles about the Christian faith and truth*. It is out of this divine authorization given for the Gentiles that he speaks the words we are treating. Listening obediently to Paul's words therefore is necessary to all who follow Christ. We should take Paul's words as if they are Christ's very words, since Jesus expected his apostles to be his surrogate voice: 'whoever listens to you listens to me' (Lk 10:16). This means we cannot treat these words as simply 'Paul's opinion', any more than a good Jew would say of the Torah 'oh, that's just Moses' opinion'. We must not shoot the messenger but rather take up the posture of an amenable disciple of the message Paul delivers from our Lord.

## A Wide and Narrow View

To get well positioned for a faithful reading of these words let us place them in their context - something essential to do if we seek to interpret any written document. In most of this letter (1 Timothy) Paul instructs Timothy about 'how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth'. False teaching had been eroding such holy behaviour and Paul directs Timothy to oppose the errors with sound teaching and foster again appropriate practices in the Ephesian churches. In the more immediate context (**2:1-3:16**) Paul deals with the more public activities of the house-churches with regards to their praying (2:1-7), the conduct of men and women in these assemblies (2:8-15) and the characteristics of their elders and deacons (3:1-13). We should note that this section is enveloped in matters of worship: Paul starts with prayer (2:1ff) and ends with praise. Maintaining this public worship within the household of the living God gives significance to the dangers of the false teaching and urgency to the directions of this section. The narrower section under consideration (**2:8-15**) speaks about appropriate gender conduct within these 'temples of prayer' to the true God in Ephesus.

The section of 2:8-15 can be divided into two sections: in **vv 8-10** Paul corrects disruptions in the churches with regard to the men (who must be at peace with each other) and the women (who were dressing in an ungodly manner); in **vv 11-15** (below) Paul deals with the attitudes that a woman should have toward the men and leadership of the church. It is this last section that provides most help in answering our question on whether God's word prohibits women from being in pastoral leadership in a church.

*(11) Let a woman learn in silence [quietness] with full submission. (12) I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent [be 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, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.*

### Affirmations to Consider

In this passage Paul is speaking about some important gender matters and how they are to shape behaviour in the household of the living God. Let us look at his main affirmations:

1. The **Creation** and the **Fall** (v 13 and 14) provide the reasons for the required female behaviour (v 11 and 12). Paul is explaining why he required certain behaviour, and as we will see, his reasons are rooted in the creation account of Genesis 2 and 3. He is not merely commanding behaviour but giving us reasons for his apostolic directions so that we can see why he says what he says. He wants us to track with him in two important principles:

a. The **Gender Creation Principle** given by Paul, is 'that Adam was formed first and then Eve' (Genesis 2). Here and elsewhere (1 Cor 11:2-16) Scripture makes clear that there is a pre-Fall creation order between the sexes in which God has given the leadership between the sexes to the man ('Adam made first'). This gender order is not the result of the fall. Rather its inversion

was part of the fall and the harmful consequences. As Christ came to bring us back to 'how it was in the beginning', men and woman are to therefore again find their place within this divine ordering (ie, that headship and submission originally designed by God). This gender order of creation is not reversed or eradicated in the realm of redemption, but rather redeemed. That Paul grounds his directives in pre-fall creation gives his instructions a normative and transcultural authority. He is not giving expedient advice to a temporary cultural problem in Ephesus but *normalizing* what's going on there with *universal gender principles*. Because of this *gender-creation-principle* Paul gave the instructions of vv 11 and 12.

b. The **Gender Fall Principle** given by Paul, 'not Adam but Eve was deceived' (Genesis 3) also gives his instructions a universal relevance. Unlike Adam who sinned knowingly, Eve was deceived, leading to her transgression. Her 'deception' is stated by Paul as a historical fact of the story of Genesis 3, and he implies that it is something that all the fallen daughters of Eve are also vulnerable to. It does not mean women are by nature more prone to believe lies than men are, for Paul expected woman to share in the common command "let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Col 3:16). He also expected the older woman to teach the younger woman in Titus 2:3. Probably given the dynamics of the temptation of Eve by Satan, it was Eve's insubordination to the creation order between the sexes that exposed her to deception. The word of God in the garden was knowingly rejected by Adam, but the lies of the Serpent were ignorantly believed by Eve. She did not consult her husband to whom God has given the original word. Vulnerability to deception and its tragic unforeseen consequences was the problem of the fall for the woman, as much as failed leadership was the problem for the man. How sin came into the world was through this gender disorder, a fact which has vital consequences for leadership positions in the church of God. Because of this *gender-fall-principle* Paul gave the instructions of vv 11 and 12.

2. Based upon the Creation and Fall principle, **Paul wants women to relate appropriately to the men** (particularly leaders) **in the house churches**. This is explained as being 'in submission' to them and 'not exercising authority over them', and being 'in quietness' and 'not teaching' them. Hopefully you can see how Paul is applying Genesis 2 and 3 to the church in Ephesus. He is normalizing abnormal happenings. He is applying creation to culture and wanting women to behave in keeping with their created identities and fallen vulnerabilities. Because women are not in the relation of responsible headship (Eve being made second) women in Christ should have a teachable, quiet and submissive spirit (also 1 Peter 3:1-6). They should also not participate in improper activity that would usurp the man's God-given responsibility. Paul words are formative of a 'creation culture' among the Christian women in Ephesus. He wants to 'sanctify gender' from the contaminations around them.

3. **The type of teaching that women are prohibited to do** here is limited by the context to public leadership teaching in a church. The broader context points us in this direction. We should note that the words 'to teach or exercise authority over a man' (2:12) is a grammatical couplet. The two ideas I believe are mutually interpreted. So it is reasonable to interpret this prohibition of women teaching not in absolute terms but relative to teaching that exercises authority over a man. Although the text could be read as a clear and absolute ban on women teaching men, I

believe the nearer leadership context of our text (3:1ff) and other New Testament Scriptures (eg Col 3:16) should direct us to less extreme position.

4. Lastly, what about **'women being saved in childbearing'** (vs 15)? Some have understood this as a reference to the birth of Jesus ('the childbearing'), which most commentators rightly recognize as incorrect. Paul is rather talking about the unique role of woman as bearing and nurturing children. I think his point is a generalization. He is affirming that the sanctification process (that is, 'salvation') happens by serving God faithfully within the scope of our gender created pattern and not outside of it. 'Childbearing' is probably a synecdoche, a part-for-the-whole, for created feminine vocations. Women should not 'want to be like men' (nor men women) but serve God within the ways that he created. If women do as much, in faith and love and holiness and self-control, their godly behaviour will keep them from deception and sin and so be pleasing to the Lord.

### **A Conclusion to Draw**

Reflecting then on what Paul is affirming here and the grounds for his affirmation, we can now come to our investigative question: Does God's Word prohibit women from being in pastoral leadership in a church? In the light of the above I believe the answer is 'Yes'. This text prohibits women to act in ways contrary to the creational ordering of Genesis and warns of the consequences if they do (deception). Since the tasks of pastors and elders requires them to lead men by authoritative teaching, for a women to be a pastor would go against the explicit words of Paul in vs 12 and cut against the grain of the original creation order. The normal pattern of God – for which there may be Deborah-like exceptions - is for the community of redemption to reflect and honour the gender patterns of creation. If men are led and taught by female pastors that would be doing the opposite of what the Lord is teaching us through his apostle Paul, and should not be permitted. Rather, both men and women will be saved and brought into glorious personal fulfilment in Christ as they serve him in terms of how he created their genders originally to be. May his Church be the world's salt and light on these important matters.

*I, Jesus, hope to come to you soon, but I am saying these things to you through the words of my apostle so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and bulwark of the truth.*

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