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THE CONDUCT OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

1 Timothy 2:9-15

By

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1 Timothy Lesson 7

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I've always thought that being a TV weather forecaster would be a pleasant job. You don't have to report on war or tragedies; you just get on camera and tell everyone about the chance of rain or snow or clouds or beautiful sunshine.

But I read recently that TV meteorologists frequently get hate mail and obscene phone calls. People call up and swear at them because the weather isn't what they wanted. One forecaster received a hangman's noose in the mail—as if he were personally responsible for the bad weather!

Being a pastor is kind of like that at times. I didn't write the Bible. God didn't even consult me in the process. I just try to report what it says. But sometimes people get upset with me because they don't like the forecast. That's probably going to be the case when I tell you what the Bible says about the conduct of women in the church. I confess, if I could write the script myself, I would not write it as Paul did. But being a Christian means obeying apostolic doctrine, not changing the message to be more compatible with our times. So my task today is to tell you what God's Word says about this sensitive but significant topic.

I have read the arguments of the "evangelical feminists." I wish I could be convinced, because their views are not as culturally offensive as the traditional view. Besides, I like women, I'm not threatened by women, and I don't have a problem with the idea of women in church leadership--except that I can't escape what to me is the plain teaching of Scripture that prohibits women from exercising authority over men.

Our text is the central one to grapple with. Paul was correcting a problem in the Ephesian church. Presumably, the false teachers whom Timothy was to confront had led astray a number of women in the church, both in doctrine and morals (1:19). Ephesus was a sensual city, with temple prostitution devoted to the worship of the goddess Diana (or, Artemis), whose idol had multiple

breasts. It was also a center of commerce, with many wealthy people. Apparently some church women were dressing in a sensual and extravagant manner, so Paul corrects this by telling Timothy how godly women should adorn themselves (2:9-10; compare 5:11-15).

In 2 Timothy 3:6-7, Paul mentions false teachers who enter “households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Thus the false teachers were appealing to women under a load of guilt who were living by their feelings instead of by God’s truth. Of course, Second Timothy was written later than First Timothy. But probably the situation confronted there had already begun when Paul wrote First Timothy. So he corrects this by commanding that women are not to teach or exercise authority over men in the church; rather, their normal sphere of ministry should be in the home (1 Tim. 2:11-15; see Titus 2:3-5). Thus,

The conduct of women in the church should be marked by godliness and submission to male leadership.

In 2:9-10, he deals with the proper *attire* of women which is godliness; in 2:11-15, he deals with the proper *attitude* of women, which is submission to male leadership.

1. The proper attire of Christian women: not focused on outward appearance, but on godliness (2:9-10).

Our grooming and clothing says a lot about our values and the way we think. If a woman dresses in a sensuous manner or if by inordinate attention to grooming she emphasizes external beauty, it reveals that her emphasis is on the superficial and worldly rather than on that which is significant from God’s perspective. Paul’s directive in verse 9 means that Christian women should not dress in a seductive manner nor in a luxurious, fashion-conscious manner that would arouse jealousy on the part of poorer women. Rather, she should put her emphasis on good deeds.

Obviously he is talking about a woman’s appearance not only when she attends church, but at all times. He is not prohibiting a woman from looking attractive, as long as she is not seductive or showy. Nor is he putting an absolute ban on a woman’s braiding

her hair or wearing modest jewelry. He's talking about emphasis. He was correcting women who went to great expense and effort to braid jewels and expensive ornaments into their hair. Their clothing was showy and expensive. Their appearance did not reflect a value system with God at the center nor did it draw you to their godly character. It focused on the external. It was worldly. It was the wrong emphasis. Christian women should be marked by good works.

I would encourage my sisters in Christ to take to heart Paul's command here to dress modestly and discreetly. "Modestly" (in the original) means to be free from shame; "discreetly" means to have control over one's passions. Many modern fashions are shameful and seductive. They are designed to attract attention to the body and to arouse lust. Men are aroused by sight (that's why pornography attracts men). You may think that your Christian brothers should be free from lustful thoughts. Yes, they should! But you should not put a stumbling block in their way by dressing seductively! "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised" (Prov. 31:30). So Paul's first instruction is that Christian women must dress properly and put their emphasis on godliness.

2. The proper attitude of Christian women: not assertive, but submissive to male church leadership (2:11-15).

Keep in mind here that I'm just your friendly reporter. I didn't make up the script; I just report and explain it. Like it or not, the Bible is not politically correct, in tune with our modern sensibilities. Also, there are many truths in the Bible that are seemingly contradictory or paradoxical. You have to hold both sides in tension, not going off the deep end either way. As we saw last week, God is sovereign in saving whom He chooses, but He commands us to pray for the salvation of all.

When it comes to the roles of men and women, the Bible is clear that *both* male and female reflect the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Men are not superior over women nor women over men. In Christ, men and women are equal (Gal. 3:28), but at the same time, they are to fulfill different roles. Often in Scripture, the male/female relationship is a picture of the divine/human relationship.

Thus (in Eph. 5:21-25), after instructing all Christians to be subject to one another in the fear of Christ, Paul stipulates that in marriage, wives must be subject to their husbands because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ also is the head of the church. And husbands must love their wives just as Christ sacrificially loved the church. In this way we reflect the image of God, in which the Son is equal to the Father and yet voluntarily submits to Him; and the Father loves the Son. We also reflect the relationship of Christ to His church, in which He accepts us as His brothers and sisters, and yet we submit to Him.

Paul teaches (both in our text and in 1 Cor. 11:3-16) that there is also to be a gender-based hierarchy in the context of equality in the local church. While it would be wrong to emphasize the hierarchy and neglect equality, it is equally wrong to emphasize equality and throw out any form of hierarchy. While “evangelical feminists” try to explain the hierarchy as a cultural thing (thus not binding for today), every time Paul mentions the subject, he appeals to the Old Testament, not to some cultural factor, for support. So it is a serious error, in my judgment, to take a verse like Galatians 3:28 (“neither male nor female” in Christ) and make it the governing verse by radically reinterpreting the plain sense of other texts, such as 1 Timothy 2:11-15. We need to affirm both aspects of the truth.

In our text, Paul spells out the realm (2:11-12); the reasons (2:13-14); and the reward for submission (2:15).

- A. The realm of submission involves activities where a woman would exercise authority over a man (2:11-12).

Paul is speaking here about the church, not the home (although, as mentioned, women are to be subject to their husbands in the home). It is significant that Paul directs the women to learn. In the Jewish culture, they were not able to go to school to learn the Torah. But Paul wants women to learn as long as their attitude is marked by two qualities: “quietness” and “submissiveness.”

The word translated “quietly” doesn’t mean absolute silence, but rather to have inner tranquility or peace (see 2:2). Women are not to be agitated, assertive rebel-rousers in the church. “Submissiveness” is a military word, meaning under in rank. A lieutenant and a sergeant are equal in personhood, but different in rank. Even

so, women are to put themselves in rank under men in church leadership. Paul adds the words, "in entire" (submissiveness) to show that it is more than mere outward obedience; the attitude of respect is included. The implied object of their submission is church leaders (elders) who teach sound doctrine.

The word translated "exercise authority" is used only here in the New Testament and has the nuance of usurping authority or being domineering. Apparently some of the Ephesian women had taken a seminar on assertiveness training and were applying it by teaching even the men in the worship assembly. Paul is prohibiting this since, as he shows (2:13-14), it violates God's pattern of authority and submission as pictured in creation and the fall.

I realize that Paul opens a host of questions which he leaves unanswered. Can women teach men in a home Bible study (remember, the early church met in homes)? What about Sunday School classes (or "Precept")? What about the role of women in "para-church" ministries? Can they be in leadership positions over men? What about a woman teaching as long as she is in submission to male elders? What about a woman teaching through writing books or teaching a man individually (as Priscilla and Aquila did with Apollos [Acts 18:26])? What about all the noteworthy exceptions in Scripture (Deborah, Huldah, Junia, etc.)? What about the many godly and effective women missionaries down through church history?

I can't begin to answer all those questions! But I can give several principles that apply to the church. First, the office of elder is limited to men (1 Tim. 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9 assume male elders, and in every N.T. instance elders are men; also, Jesus chose men as apostles with authority over the church). This means that the office of teaching elder (1 Tim. 5:17) is restricted to men.

The Greek word for "teach" is used almost 100 times in the New Testament, and in only three instances does it refer to teaching individuals (Roy Zuck, cited by Ann L. Bowman, "Monograph" from the International School of Theology, "Women in Ministry: An Exegetical Study of 1 Timothy 2:11-15," p. 4, footnote 21). So Paul probably had in mind situations where women taught the entire church. Is Paul giving one prohibition (a woman should not teach men in a domineering way) or two (a woman should not

teach men nor should she do anything else to exercise authority over men)? The Greek grammar indicates that Paul intends two distinct and yet closely related commands (Bowman, p. 5, footnote 31): A woman should not teach men, nor should she do anything else to exercise authority over men.

So does Paul mean that a godly woman can never teach men? Then how do we explain God's manifest blessing on women missionaries who have evangelized, planted the church, and taught whole cultures of men and women? We need to be careful not to put God in our doctrinal boxes. He is notorious for doing as He pleases. The many noteworthy exceptional women in Scripture tell us to be careful here.

But the exceptions as well as the plain teaching of passages such as our text show us that the exceptions are just that. The norm should be men in leadership and teaching positions in the church. If God raises up a gifted woman, we ought to recognize her ministry. But even so, she will have an attitude of submission to male leadership. And, she will focus on teaching women. I think Elisabeth Elliot is a modern example of such a gifted woman.

B. The reasons for submission are the order of creation and the order of the fall (2:13-14).

It is compelling that every time Paul cites reasons for gender-based distinctions in the church, he goes to the Old Testament. This means that we can't dismiss this as a cultural matter that doesn't apply to our day. God could have created Adam and Eve simultaneously, but He did not. He first created Adam and later created Eve to be a helper for Adam, not vice versa. Paul explains (1 Cor. 11:9): "For indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake." Thus while being equal with Adam as an image-bearer of God, Eve was yet to be subject to Adam so that their relationship reflected the image of God and His relationship to His creation. So Paul is saying (1 Tim. 2:13) that the order in creation should be reflected in the church.

Then he adds the order of the fall (2:14). Paul isn't implying that Adam was less guilty than Eve, nor is he putting all the blame on Eve. Both were culpable (Rom. 5:12). Nor is Paul implying that women are constitutionally more prone to deception than men.

The Bible is clear that we all are easily deceived by sin and false doctrine. What Paul is getting at is that in the fall, the God-ordained roles were reversed. Satan didn't approach Adam, but rather Eve, so that he could upset the reflection of God's image in the original couple by enticing the woman to act independently of her husband's and God's authority. She didn't need to remain under her husband or God; she could attain god-like existence by acting on her own.

So Paul is saying here that this role reversal that brought such awful consequences on the human race should not be repeated in the church. The responsibility for teaching and leadership in the church falls on qualified men (3:1-7).

How then can women serve in the church? If they can't assume leadership and teaching roles over men, what can they do? Paul goes on to show that a woman's normal sphere of ministry is in the home. If she serves in her God-appointed sphere, she will receive her reward.

C. The reward for submission is salvation from the curse (2:15).

Many commentators call verse 15 one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to interpret. As can be expected, many different interpretations have been suggested, each hinging on different lexical and grammatical variables. I can't go into great detail, but here are a few:

(1) Women will be kept safe (physically; the Greek word for "preserved" is "saved") through childbirth in spite of the curse of the fall. The problem with this view is that it isn't true: many godly women have died in childbirth.

(2) Women will be saved (spiritually) through the Childbirth, namely, the birth of Christ, the seed of the woman, who brought salvation to the human race. The problem with this view is, if this were Paul's meaning, "he could hardly have chosen a more obscure or ambiguous way of saying it" (Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles Eerdmans*], p. 78).

(3) Women will be preserved from insignificance and find fulfillment by bearing children. This imposes an unusual meaning on the word "saved."

(4) Women will be saved from the corruption of this sinful world by assuming their proper role at home. This is closer to the truth, but it doesn't grant the normal meaning to the word "saved."

(5) Women will be saved spiritually (with an emphasis on the future aspect of salvation) if their lives show the fruit of saving faith, namely, submission to God's order as evidenced by taking their proper role as godly mothers. This is the best view, since the word "saved" in the Pastoral Epistles always refers to spiritual salvation.

This doesn't mean that a woman earns salvation by bearing children. Rather, it looks at the future aspect of salvation. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ. But genuine saving faith always results in a life of good works and in the development of godly character. The hope of future salvation should motivate us to a life of good deeds now, in spite of the hardships. Paul mentions child bearing to tie in the earlier reference to the fall. In spite of Eve's sin and the curse (increased pain in childbirth), women who hope in God and His salvation will submit to their role in the home. An evidence of their salvation is their continuance in faith, love, sanctity (holiness), and self-restraint (the same word as "discreetly" in 2:9, meaning control over one's passions). Thus Paul comes full circle to say that the conduct of women in the church should be marked by godliness and submission.

Conclusion

I've spent most of the message explaining a difficult text—difficult exegetically, but also difficult culturally, because it runs against the grain of our modern world. I want to conclude by applying these verses to three areas:

(1) Check your attitude toward Scripture: Defiant or compliant? Because of our rebellion against God, we all have a tendency to shrug off the parts of His Word that we don't like. If you only submit to the parts of the Bible you like, then you're just using the Bible to reinforce your sinful desires. Even Satan quoted the Bible with Jesus to support his temptation! The test of whether you are under the lordship of Jesus Christ is when the Bible confronts your preferences. Yes, we need to determine what the Bible means before we apply it. But it's easy to shrug off difficult truth by saying,

"I don't agree with that interpretation," when really we don't want to submit to God. Be careful!

(2) Check your attitude toward the opposite sex: Competitive or cooperative? There should be no war between the sexes in the church. Men should esteem and affirm godly women for their ministries. Women should respect and submit to godly elders in their leadership. Elders are not to lord it over the flock, but to be examples of godliness. The times when elders need to use their authority are rare. If we all submit to God and serve in our God-given roles, there will be cooperation. And, as our text shows, Christian men and women should relate to one another in purity, not in sensuality.

(3) Check your attitude toward the home: A burden or a blessing? Children should never be viewed by Christian women as a hindrance to their fulfillment through a career. Children are one of God's greatest blessings. The responsibility of shaping their character through godly example in the home is more important than any career, male or female, because the whole fabric of society depends on it. If we seek self-fulfillment, even if through a teaching or leadership ministry, we will come up empty. If we deny self and serve in the roles God's Word ordains, He will bless us beyond measure.

Well, that's the forecast, folks! If you don't like it, remember, I don't make up the weather; I just report it!

Discussion Questions

1. Does submission imply weakness or inferiority? Why/why not?
2. Some say that the submission of women was related to the cultural situation of that time. How do you answer this?
3. Is it wrong for a Christian couple to be purposefully childless in order to pursue a career or ministry?
4. Many evangelicals argue that Gal. 3:28 erases all distinctions in the church on the basis of gender. Discuss.

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