

1 Timothy 2:11,12: Total Ban or Local Restriction

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Introduction

From the time of the early church 1 Timothy 2:8-15 has been widely regarded as a clear prohibition of the ordination of women. That is the official position of the LCA. In raising the issue of women's ordination afresh, our church's theology commission is eager to reexamine the relevant texts, treating them with due seriousness as the authoritative word of God for church and society today. When Lutherans read the Bible we are committed to asking two questions: What does this text say, and what does the text mean for us today? First the text has to be explained and understood. This is the task of exegesis. Then it has to be applied to the current situation in church and society. This is the task of hermeneutics. We resist the widespread practice of lifting texts out of context and applying them without reflection to the issues and questions of today. The Bible is not a reservoir of proof texts to bolster personal positions.

Considering the historical, linguistic and cultural gap between the biblical text and the twentieth century, it is necessary to raise questions about the meaning of words and the historical setting of the text under review. That is never so true as when the meaning of a text is disputed. It is the purpose of this paper to study 1 Timothy 2:8-15 closely, paying attention to the church-historical setting to which these words are addressed, the significant words used, and the thrust of the argument. As the text is studied we will keep coming back to the most important question of all, in the light of the current debate. Are Paul's words an apostolic directive determinative for the world-wide church until the end of time, or are they a pastoral admonition that applies only to the church in Ephesus?

Paul's major concern

Paul's starting point in 1 Timothy is God's will that all people on earth be saved (1 Tim 2:3,4). In the light of that overarching concern Paul advises Timothy on matters pertaining to the worship life of the Ephesian church. First and foremost the church should offer prayers for all people, starting with kings and others in positions of authority, so that society may enjoy peace and quietness, and people more readily come to faith (1 Tim 2:1,2).

The situation in Ephesus

Problems had arisen that hindered the purpose of God at Ephesus where Timothy was a pastor. Through the early ministry of Paul and Apollos the church was established in Ephesus, starting with the conversion of about twelve Jewish men (Acts 19:7). Paul conducted an intensive three-year ministry in Ephesus, resulting in the conversion to the Christian faith of numbers of Jews, as well as gentiles who gave up their superstitious practices and their worship of the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:8-20).

This miraculous growth, however, was followed by the entry of 'savage wolves' into the church, 'not sparing the flock' (Acts 20:29). It is clear from the letters to the Ephesians and Timothy that

a division soon arose between a faction influenced by ‘teachers of the law’ (1 Tim 1:7) who wanted to uphold the Jewish law in all respects, abstaining from certain foods and forbidding marriage (4:3), and a libertarian faction opposed to a strict adherence to Jewish law. The promotion of false doctrine (1:3) by teachers on both sides had made the members angry and argumentative (2:8; 6:4). The libertarians held that the resurrection of the dead had ‘already taken place’ (2 Tim 2:18), and therefore the judgment was past and people could live as they pleased because salvation was assured. This resulted in wicked and godless behaviour (1:8-11; 2 Tim 3:1-5), the wearing of ostentatious clothing and jewellery by certain women (2:9), and the pleasure-seeking and gossip-mongering of some widows (5:6-15).

The place of women at Ephesus

The numerous references to women throughout 1 and 2 Timothy indicate that women were heavily influenced by the teachings of the libertarian group, and they probably formed part of its leadership team (eg 1 Tim 2:9-15; 4:7; 5:13-15; 2 Tim 3:6,7). They wanted to play a major role in the teaching ministry of the church.

On two chief counts this was unthinkable. First of all, the founding members of the church were converts from Judaism (R Strelan 1996: 153-55). For them it was a question whether women could even be instructed in the scriptures, let alone become teachers. Paul’s saying that women could learn (2:9) would have represented a major and troublesome step forward for them. Rabbinical instruction in the Torah was generally speaking out of bounds to women.

Secondly, other newcomers formerly lived as hedonists, magicians, and idol worshippers (Acts 19:18-27). Much of the appeal of the new faith lay in the gospel of grace that Paul promoted but their instruction in the faith was not thorough enough to make them appreciate that the Christian way involved making a clean break with their wicked past. They had gained the mistaken impression that Christ’s ministry meant immunity from the wrath of God. They wanted to teach and so flaunt their newly acquired status, they would wear whatever gaudy clothing they desired and so flaunt their freedom. But such ostentation was totally out of step with mainstream society. As newcomers to the faith and poorly instructed, it was important that they continue to learn, but not become involved in teaching. They were neophytes. They had a long way to go. They did not know the scriptures. They had picked up those snatches that took their fancy. For them Paul’s words, that they may learn quietly but not teach, would have been a troublesome step backward.

Universal ban or local restriction?

How can we ascertain whether a biblical command remains in force in the church today? If the text says explicitly that the command is in force in perpetuity there can be no doubt that that is so (eg Matt 26:29; 28:20; 1 Cor 11:26). The chief criterion is that the command stands in service of the gospel. On the other hand, the text may exhibit signs that the command applies to the specific situation for which it was intended. The church has decided not to enforce hats for women (1 Cor 11:2-16), prayers offered by men only with hands raised (1 Tim 2:8), and abstaining from meat with blood in it (Acts 15:29). What follows is the evidence that 1 Tim 2:8-15 has special application to the local situation Paul confronted in Ephesus and should not be necessarily applied to the church in every place till the end of time.

(a) When Paul says, 'I do not permit a woman to teach' (2:12), he is giving a ruling for all the places of worship in Ephesus ('in everyplace', v 8). He does not say that the instruction should be observed 'in all the churches' or 'until the Lord comes', thereby universalising and absolutising the admonition. Nor does he speak of his command as a command of the Lord. It is Paul's directive for the specific situation that pertains in Ephesus.

(b) On every occasion that the verb 'to permit' is used elsewhere in the New Testament, with or without a preceding 'not', it refers to a highly specific situation, limited to the time and place where the order is given (Matthew 8:21; 19:8; Mark 5:13; John 19:38; Acts 21:39,40; 26:1; 27:3; 28:16; 1 Cor 16:7; Heb 6:3). It is not used in any of these texts for commands of our Lord or his apostle that are meant to be binding on the church for all time. Therefore it is highly unlikely that the situation is different when the word is used at v 12 in connection with women speaking in church.

(c) Throughout our text Paul uses terminology drawn from contemporary 'rules for the household' (see Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Pet 3:1–7) which likewise spoke of modesty, decency, piety, respect, and an external deportment that reflected moderation in all things. Behaviour that deviated from these ideals undermined the mission of the church. Paul is therefore at pains to advocate a Christian life – style that conforms as closely as possible to codes of behaviour current in the society of his day (Phil 4:8). Adjustments must be made for a situation where totally different norms prevail. A church that behaves in ways at odds with best current practices will not be heard.

(d) Two concepts surround and control the text: quietness (vv 2,11,12) and salvation (vv 3,4,[5,6],15). In a quiet setting, both within society and the church, God's saving mission is most effectively accomplished. The word 'quiet', used twice in our text (vv 11,12), is not the Greek word for absolute silence but the word for respectful quiet or tranquility. It speaks of a mood of gentleness and an attitude of humble receptivity (Acts 22:2; 2 Thess 3:12; see also 1 Tim 2:2; 1 Pet 3:4). In an environment that frowned on female rowdiness it was essential that Christian women hold their tongues and not disrupt the 'quiet and peaceable life' (v 2) in which the gospel has free course.

(e) Teaching as an exercise of female authority over men was probably excluded at Ephesus, but not necessarily throughout the church of the first century. It has become popular to argue that it is not teaching by women itself that Paul rules out, but teaching in a domineering way, or in a way that violates the truth (eg Barrett, Fairbairn, Guthrie, Dibelius and Conzelmann, Kelly, Simpson, Payne). It is pointed out that the verb translated 'to have authority' (authentein) appears only once in the NT, and outside the NT it usually refers to aggressive, assertive and even violent behaviour towards others. But the traditional translation 'to teach and to have authority over a man' is most likely correct. It has been ably demonstrated (see Koestenberger: 179) that in extra-biblical literature the word *oude* (nor), that connects 'teach' and 'have authority', always connects two verbs that are positive or two verbs that are negative, not a positive and a negative verb. Since 'teach' is always positive in the letters to Timothy, 'to have authority' must be positive also. It cannot mean 'to domineer'. The evidence remains compelling, however, that women taught in the early Christian assembly. Admittedly Priscilla and Aquila first took Apollos aside before explaining to him the Christian faith 'more accurately'

(Acts 18:26). But Paul tells the older widows who were responsible for Christian instruction ‘to teach what is good’ (Tit 2:2). And the Corinthian prophets, among whom women were included, had a catechetical role in public worship (1 Cor 14:19). On balance it is probable that Paul ruled out all female teaching at Ephesus because of the problems it created. Elsewhere women did teach publicly in the New Testament church, so a general prohibition is impossible.

(f) As for Paul’s call for female subordination in our text, it is vital to note that he does not speak of women being subordinate to men. The submission, or obedience, of women has more to do with them knowing their proper place in church and society, and taking it. It has to do with conformity to social standards. The first converts to Christianity were predominantly Jewish, so Paul was eager to avoid offending people raised in the Jewish faith. In Judaism only men were allowed to learn the Torah and teach it. Women took their place in society alongside slaves and children, not as the equals of men. When they converted to Christianity women were obliged to maintain a respectful silence, let men take the lead, decline to contradict or argue with the male leaders of the congregation, appreciate that the domestic arena was the proper place for women, and adorn themselves in good works that would attract more converts to the Christian faith and do the church a power of good. That is what Paul means by subordination. It does not have to do with conforming to the structure of existence supposedly embedded in creation.

(g) It is inconsistent of the church to enforce the prohibition on women teaching in worship and then ignore other prescriptions and restrictions that are of equal weight in the Timothy text. The church has not seen fit to enforce the instruction in our text directed to men, that they pray ‘lifting up holy hands’ (v 8). Yet that is Paul’s will and it is expressed in words no weaker than ‘I do not permit a woman to teach’ (v 12). Similarly, Paul tells the Ephesians that men only should pray (v 8), yet it is rare for the church to forbid women from praying in public worship. In a different situation, Paul assumes that women do in fact offer prayers in church (1 Cor 11:5). No less weighty is Paul’s prohibition on braided hair, gold, pearls, and expensive clothes (v 9), but this is not enforced in most churches today. Consistency requires that these regulations be reintroduced if we are to maintain the ban on women preaching and teaching in public worship. We cannot pick and choose among instructions that carry equal weight in the biblical text.

Summary

Our text addresses a double audience at Ephesus: strict Jewish Christians steeped in the traditions of their faith, and more progressive converts from Judaism and the Greek world of the first century AD. The Jewish Christians, probably representing the founding members of the Ephesian church, had to be jolted into a new appreciation of the equality and liberty of the gospel as it applied to women. But Paul was willing to move slowly, one step at a time. Women are to be permitted to sit quietly and respectfully at the feet of the teachers and preachers and learn the scriptures. To go further and adopt a teaching role would be to cause undue offence. The strictures of Judaism had formed the mind of those embarking on this new faith venture. The time would come when the shock of having women take a more upfront position would abate. The time would come when women were sufficiently versed in the scriptures to do so. For the time being, and to avoid offence Paul’s pastoral admonition is that women maintain a low profile. Some converts on the other hand, both Jew and gentile, had to be urged to take things slowly. Excited by the freedom of the gospel and the equality of all people that it implied, some

women were moving into teaching roles without thorough instruction, without appreciating that the Christian faith did not allow for libertarian excesses in terms of conduct and behaviour, and without due recognition of the offence they were causing in the church and the scandal they were creating in society at large. Paul advocates a middle position that has the effect of moving the Judaisers forward and restraining the progressives. This does not represent compromise, but concern for that which is of ultimate importance – stability and peace in church and society, so that the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ may be proclaimed and take root in human hearts without let or hindrance.

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