

## **“What Is Proper for Women” (1 Timothy 2:8–15)**

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I think most people would agree that there is a problem with men and women in our culture. That is particularly true in light of the many different accounts of sexual abuse and harassment that have come to light within recent months and years. How men and women relate to each other in this country is problematic, to say the least.

Though most people would agree with that, we don't seem to agree on the solution to this problem. Some people think the way forward is to have more female leaders. Many people think every other president should be a woman, that half of Congress should be female, and that there should be more female governors, mayors, and judges. The same people think that there should be far more female CEOs, board members, principals, professors, military officers, and so on. They might think that for every male role in a movie or television show, there should be a female role. I suspect that if the people who hold these opinions thought about religion, they would think there should be a female Pope and priests, too.

In other words, some people think that the way forward is to have equal roles for men and women. Not only are they equal in value, worth, respect, and dignity, but they also should be able to perform all the same jobs. The only difference is biological. And those biological differences are generally only concerned with reproductive organs and size and strength.

But what if this isn't the way forward? What if the way forward is to go backward? And I don't mean that we should go back to the nineteenth century, when women couldn't vote. I don't mean we should go back to, say, a thousand or two or three thousand years ago, when women were often treated like property. What if the way forward is to look back to a time when the world was uncorrupted by the forces of evil? What if the way forward is to look back to the way God designed the world to function, before sin invaded the creation and distorted everything?

I realize that many people think such an idea would be foolish. Many people would believe such a move to be regress, not progress. I understand that. The reality is that Christianity has always been countercultural. Christianity is more than just a way to be forgiven by God. Christianity is a way of looking at all of reality. It's a worldview, a story that gives shape to our lives, a map that shows us where to go, a set of lenses that helps us to see the world as it really is.

And the Christian worldview will always be at odds with elements of the prevailing culture's worldview. This is particularly true when it comes to the issue of men and women.

We'll see that today as we continue to look at a book in the Bible called 1 Timothy. This is a letter written by the apostle Paul to his younger associate, Timothy, who was in a city in the Roman Empire called Ephesus.

Over the past few weeks, we've seen that Paul encouraged Timothy to stop people who taught false doctrine. Now, he tells Timothy that men and women have different roles to play in the church.

What we see in this passage will challenge some of us. At first, some of us might think this couldn't possibly be right. That will likely be true if you're not a Christian. But I would ask that you keep an open mind. I also ask you to think about this: There has never been a country that has had as much wealth as America has right now. There has never been a people with as many choices as Americans have now. Despite all of this, we are, on the whole, unhappy. The number of suicides, drug overdose deaths, various addictions, and drug prescriptions for depression and anxiety speak to that fact. Perhaps there's something fundamentally wrong with the way we're doing things. That's something to consider as we explore today's passage.

Without further ado, let's turn to 1 Timothy 2:8–15:

<sup>8</sup> I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; <sup>9</sup> likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, <sup>10</sup> but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. <sup>11</sup> Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. <sup>12</sup> I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. <sup>13</sup> For Adam was formed first, then Eve; <sup>14</sup> and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. <sup>15</sup> Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.<sup>1</sup>

There are four points to this passage. The first two concern appropriate behavior for men and women, respectively. The third point states what women should not do. And the fourth point provides the reason.

The first thing that Paul says is “I desire.” You might think he is simply expressing his own opinions or wishes, and that these are not necessarily commands from God. But at the very

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

beginning of the letter, Paul describes himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1). Paul was commissioned by God—commanded by God—to be the official messenger of Jesus. God appointed him to this role (1 Tim. 2:7). In 2 Timothy, Paul says that all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16)—it’s ultimately written by God through human beings, which is what the apostle Peter says, too (2 Pet. 1:21). Peter also refers to Paul’s letters and then speaks of “other Scriptures,” which means that Paul’s letters are Scripture, too (2 Pet. 3:15–16). So, this isn’t just a letter from Paul. It’s also God’s word. The Holy Spirit wrote these words through Paul. The point is that these aren’t just Paul’s opinions.

Paul says that he desires “that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.” It seems the men in the church in Ephesus might have had trouble getting along. Paul says that not only those men, but men in “every place” should pray. This shows that Paul’s words in this letter are not just directed to the church in Ephesus, but to all Christians. And it’s clear that Paul’s instructions here have to do with public worship meetings. Instead of lifting hands to fight among themselves, they should lift “holy hands,” hands that are pure, hands that reach out to God, as it were. Perhaps they should be praying for all people, as Paul says at the beginning of chapter 2.

Then, Paul moves on to discuss what is appropriate for women: “women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.” It’s possible that in Ephesus, some women were showing off their wealth by wearing a lot of jewelry and “costly attire.” Paul doesn’t want anyone in the church to draw attention away from God and to themselves. When we gather as a church on the Lord’s Day, it’s not a fashion show. Our attention should be directed toward God. Anything that distracts from that focus is a hindrance. This is not a time to show off expensive clothing or jewelry.

There may be another reason why Paul doesn’t women to dress in a showy way. Women might have dressed that way to get attention from men. Even if they weren’t intending to attract or seduce men, if they dressed in an immodest way, then the men of the church might have been distracted.

As a man, I can say this: I don’t know any man who doesn’t struggle with lust. Perhaps there are some men who don’t have such problems. But every man I know who was talked on the

subject has some struggles in this area. If attractive women are wearing revealing clothing, that can not only be a distraction, but it doesn't help men who struggle with that issue. Now, it's a man's fault if he can't control his thoughts and desires. But a sister in Christ should want to help her brother out, and not be a stumbling block to him. And if a woman is dressing in a showy, revealing way, there has to be some question as to *why* she is doing that. Is she at a worship service to worship God, or to attract attention to herself?

I don't see this being a problem at this church, so I won't linger too long here. The point is that women shouldn't draw attention to themselves. Instead, they should focus on doing good works, the source of real beauty. That doesn't necessarily mean women can't wear any jewelry or makeup, or that they can't wear something fashionable. But the point is that the focus should be on God and on living for him.

Of course, the same could be said of men. I don't know that men tend to be so distracting in their looks. But I'm a man, not a woman, so I can't speak for how women might react to a very attractive man wearing something that was form-fitting or revealing. But men don't tend to do that, and that was probably true in Paul's day, so it doesn't seem to be much of a worry.

Let's move on to verses 11 and 12, for this is where things get quite controversial. Paul says, "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." This is where Paul's words grate against so many today. What does Paul mean? There seem to be two general understandings of what Paul writes here. One is to take Paul's words at face value. Women shouldn't teach in a church meeting or exercise authority over men in a church. Instead, they should be submissive and generally quiet. The other is to claim that Paul was addressing a particular cultural issue in his time. The claim is that in Ephesus, all women were uneducated and therefore not fit to teach. Since Paul was concerned about false teaching, and since the women there were uneducated, Paul tells them to learn and not teach or lead. But maybe if the cultural conditions were different, Paul wouldn't place such restrictions on women.

I don't have enough time to refute that second position thoroughly. All I can say is that Paul nowhere hints at a claim that all women in Ephesus were uneducated and that's why they shouldn't teach or lead men. Paul could have used words to communicate such an idea. He could have framed his argument in that way. But he doesn't. In fact, since the false teachers were likely male, telling women not to teach wouldn't stop the false teaching. But it probably was the case

that some women decided they, too, could be teachers. Perhaps they thought that since Jesus had come, all gender distinctions were no longer valid.

I do think that Paul means that women should not lead men in a church. In other words, they shouldn't be pastors, elders, or overseers. The Bible uses three different terms—shepherds (from which we get “pastors”), elders, and overseers—to refer to the leading and teaching office of the church. What Paul says means that women are not qualified for that office. But that doesn't mean women can't teach at all. In Titus, Paul says that older women should teach younger women (Tit. 2:3–5). And when Paul says that women should learn quietly, he can't mean absolute silence, for at least two reasons. First, Paul uses the same word in verse 2 to speak of all Christians leading a quiet life. He hardly means all Christians should be absolutely silent. Second, in another letter, 1 Corinthians, Paul says that women can pray and prophesy in church (11:5). But I do think Paul means women should submit to male leaders and teachers—pastors—and shouldn't be pastors themselves.

Again, this is where people start to claim that the Bible presents a regressive, backwards “patriarchal” view of men and women. How can we respond to this type of claim?

Well, let me say two things before we continue to look at verses in the Bible. One, I find that labels are often not helpful when dealing with controversial subjects. People who tend to oppose this passage will often bring up the word “patriarchy,” as if that's some kind of argument in and of itself. Some people now talk about “toxic masculinity,” which is kind of an unclear concept. I'm sure there are false views of masculinity that are toxic. The Bible does not teach that men should be abusive or treat women like slaves or playthings. But I think a lack of biblical manhood is also toxic. When a man refuses to accept the role that God designed for him, that could be just as toxic as the domineering, abusive man. Likewise, I don't think it's helpful to rail against “feminist” or “leftists.” Good arguments don't call names, mock people, or just make quick, baseless assertions. Christians, we need to do better in all of our conversations than resorting to these cheap, easy moves. We need to be more thoughtful and careful.

So, we need to dig deeper and think. That's one issue.

The second issue is that how we read, interpret, and react to the Bible is going to be shaped by our worldview. No one comes to the Bible objectively. We all have various beliefs, heart inclinations, philosophical commitments, and presuppositions. Sometimes, we're not even aware of those things. We often assume that we're in the right, and we look at the Bible to see if

it matches what we already assume to be true. Before we assume our generation has things right, we should examine our own beliefs. By what standard have we judged them? Why do we assume that we're right and others in the past have been wrong?

Some people assume that Paul was culturally conditioned. In other words, he was just a man of his times and his views reflected his own culture. All the while, these same people never assume that they are culturally conditioned, and that they are just men and women of their own times, with views that reflect nothing more than the passing fancies of their own culture.

If the basic story of the Bible is true—that a holy, perfect, good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God created us to function in a certain way, and that we have rebelled against him and his design for our lives—we should assume that there will be times when the Bible rubs us the wrong way. That's because God will be using his written word to challenge our assumptions and correct our views. That has always happened. The Bible has always been countercultural. The exact ways it challenges various cultures will change throughout time, but there was never a time when everyone in one country said, "Yup, everything in that book is exactly what I've always believed."

Now, back to this passage: to understand what Paul is saying, and why it makes sense, we have to see how he grounds his argument and how that shows us some important points regarding the Christian worldview.

This is the reason why women should not teach and exercise authority over men in church: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." What Paul is doing is reminding us of the beginning of the Bible.

So, let's think about the beginning of the story of the Bible. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). The crown of God's creation was humanity. In Genesis 1:26–28, we read this:

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

It’s very important to see that God made both man and woman in his image. That means that both have the same value and worth. They were both tasked with representing who God is, reflecting his glory and attributes. And man and woman were made to rule over the rest of creation by coming under the authority of God and his word.

Genesis 2 gives us a different perspective of how God made human beings. It’s not a contradictory account, it’s just different. The Hebrew way of thinking often examined one truth from different angles. In Genesis 2, we see that God makes the man first. God also gives the man a task, to “work and keep” the garden of Eden, as well as a commandment not to eat one type of fruit. All of this is loaded with meaning that I don’t have time to explain this morning. Suffice it to say, the importance of all of this goes far beyond gardening and eating.

After this, God makes a woman to be with the man. God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for<sup>5</sup> him” (Gen. 2:18). The ESV has a footnote that says, “corresponding to.” The idea is that God wouldn’t make a clone of the man, someone identical to him. No, God would make a woman who would correspond to and complement the man. She would be different in some important ways, but they would both bear God’s image.

It’s true that different faithful, Bible-believing Christians interpret the opening chapters of Genesis differently. There are different views about how old the universe is, or how literal and how figurative various things are in the text. But I think all faithful Christians must believe that God created two human beings, Adam and Eve, intentionally and for a particular purpose. He made them for each other, different from one another yet corresponding to one another and, obviously, both human and both in God’s image. It’s also important to see that the commands were given by God to the man, and that this happened before sin came into the world. This implies that the man was the head, or leader, of the woman even before sin entered into the world.

This picture of peace and harmony between God and humans, and between the first two human beings, is marred in Genesis 3. There, a serpent, an embodiment of Satan, tempts Eve by getting her to question God’s word and his goodness. She disobeys God’s commandment not to

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<sup>5</sup> Or *corresponding to*; also verse 20

eat the forbidden fruit, and Adam goes along with her. As a consequence, all of creation is under a curse, a partial punishment that God imposed against his rebellious creatures.

Though Eve was the first to sin, Adam is the one who is held accountable by God. We're told that God specifically addressed the man and questioned him about what happened. This is because Adam was the leader, the head. Theologically, we know from the whole of the Bible that Adam was the covenant head. He represented all of humanity. This is a difficult concept for people who aren't familiar with the Bible to grasp, but the idea is that we are all represented by someone, just as we're all represented in Congress by politicians, whether we voted for that person or not. Even before the fall, Adam is the leader.

Part of God's curse is that men and women would struggle against each other. God told Eve,

Your desire shall be contrary to<sup>6</sup> your husband,  
but he shall rule over you (Gen. 3:16).

If we compare that language to what God says to Cain in the next chapter of Genesis (see Gen. 4:7), we see that this means that the woman would want to dominate or master her husband, and that he would respond with a harsh rule, not loving leadership. God was saying that this would happen to all women and men in the future.

Let's now get back to Paul's argument. He says that Adam was formed first, then Eve. I believe the implication is that God made Adam first because God intended to have man be the head of the family. This is what Paul says in a letter to Christians in this same city of Ephesus. In Ephesians 5:22–24, Paul writes,

<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Paul says clearly that the husband is the head of the wife, and that the wife should submit to the husband.

But let's not forget what Paul says next. In verse 25, he says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." That's a high calling. Men are

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<sup>6</sup> Or *shall be toward* (see 4:7)

supposed to love their wives in a leading but sacrificial way. You can see how there is no hint of abuse or domineering here.

Paul also says that Eve was deceived first and sinned. Does Paul mean that women are more easily deceived or more easily given to sinning? Does Paul mean that if the serpent talked to Adam instead of Eve, sin wouldn't have entered into the world?

I don't think Paul means those things. But the fact is that the serpent did talk to Eve, not Adam. Why would that happen? Why would Satan work through a serpent, anyway? There's some mystery here, but it seems that Satan quite intentionally worked against God's created order. Genesis 1 says that human beings were to have dominion over all animals, including things that creep on the earth. Satan spoke through a creepy-crawly animal, getting a human being to trust him instead of God. Already, he was subverting the created order. And since God made the man first and gave him the commandments and held him accountable for the rebellion, it's clear that God made the man to be a leader over the woman. Satan must have known that, but he continued to subvert the created order by tempting the woman. And the woman then tempted the man. We should also see that in Genesis 3, Adam was "with her" (v. 6). He clearly didn't do a good job of leading or protecting his wife, so he is just as much to blame.

Now, that all seems to be clear. But perhaps that doesn't answer why God doesn't allow women to be pastors. Why shouldn't they be?

It's hard to answer that question in a way that will satisfy critics. We must say, though, that God made men to be leaders and women to serve alongside, but not over, men. And I think we can make some generalizations about men and women. There will likely be exceptions to these generalizations, but I think they are for the most part true. Women tend to be more nurturing. It's no surprise that most nurses, school teachers, and other children's workers have been women. I think women tend to be more patient with children, and I think this is by design.

From what I have seen in churches, men are more interested in doctrinal formulations, in systematic theology, and are not as afraid to make tough decisions. They are less likely to be driven by emotions.

Again, I'm sure there are exceptions, but God has created men and women differently. Listen to the words of a female physician, a cardiologist named Paula Johnson: "Every cell has a sex—and what that means is that men and women are different down to the cellular and molecular level. It means that we're different across all of our organs, from our brains to our

hearts, our lungs, our joints.”<sup>2</sup> Men and women are different by design, and God made men to be leaders, to be heads. This does not mean men are inherently better or more intelligent. It just means men and women are different, fitted for different roles. That’s why God did not intend women to be pastors. For example, how could a husband be the head of his wife if his wife were his pastor?

Before I make a few more general comments on this whole topic, we do have one more verse to explore, and it’s a hard one to understand. In verse 15, Paul writes, “Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.” There are three different ways to take this. Some people think the “she” in the first part of the verse refers to Eve. Salvation came to the world through her bearing children, because the distant offspring of Eve, Jesus, is the Savior (Gen. 3:15). It’s certainly true that even though Eve sinned, she became “the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20)—that’s what her name means. God used a sinful woman to bear children, who had children, who had children . . . which eventually led to the birth of Jesus. So, there is great value in bearing children, and only women can have children. Mothers should be honored greatly. Having children is no less of a task than pastoring a church. Obviously, we wouldn’t be here without mothers.

That being said, I don’t think this is what Paul means, because the second half of the verse, “if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control,” doesn’t fit this interpretation.

Some people think that this verse doesn’t speak of spiritual salvation, but of physical deliverance through the process of having a child. In the Bible, the word “saved” sometimes refers just to a temporal, physical deliverance (as in Acts 27:20, 31). In the ancient world, mothers often died in childbirth. Some people think that if women gladly except their God-given roles and live godly, faithful lives, they wouldn’t die in the process of giving birth. That’s a possible reading, but we don’t have any evidence that faithful Christian women didn’t die giving birth, while only those unfaithful, ungodly women perished.

A third reading, and probably the right one, is that women will be saved in an ultimate, spiritual sense, if they accept their God-given role, which is represented here by motherhood, and if they continue in faith and godly living. Now, this doesn’t mean that every woman is going to

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<sup>2</sup> Paula Johnson, “His and Hers . . . Healthcare,” TED talk, December 2013, quoted in Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 196.

give birth. Being single is a gift from God (1 Cor. 7:7–8). But only women can get pregnant and give birth, and Paul refers to this as one unique aspect of womanhood. And this also doesn't mean that salvation is earned. Salvation is a gift from God. But we have to think about it this way: If God has saved a person from sin and ultimate condemnation, he has also given that person the Holy Spirit to change that person, to transform that person. A changed heart responds to Jesus in faith, trusting him not only for salvation, but also trusting his words, his authority, and his design for our lives. The proof that a person has been changed is faith, godly living, and an acceptance of God's design. This is true of both men and women.

The truth is that we all have limitations and limited roles to play. We all must submit to authorities. The word "submit" is not a four-letter word; it's a good thing, not a bad thing. Unfortunately, in America we tend to be allergic to authorities and see submission as a curse instead of a gift. Honestly, I think this is a source of unhappiness. If we learned to embrace God's design instead of fighting against it, we would be more content.

God has designed authority and submission on many levels. Children must submit to parents (Eph. 6:1–3). Employees must submit to employers (Eph. 6:5–8). Yes, wives are told they should submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22). In the church, people should submit to pastors (Heb. 13:17). All of us should submit to civic leaders, to governing politicians (Rom. 13:1–7; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–17). And everyone should ultimately submit to the Lord Jesus Christ, who even submitted himself to his Father.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Jesus submitted to his Father doesn't mean he is less in value. Jesus is God the Son, no less divine than God the Father. But even the God-man knows what it's like to submit.

And Jesus shows what it's like for a man to lead in love. He was and is authoritative. He wasn't afraid to speak hard truths or perform hard tasks. But he laid down his life for his people, both men and women. He died for them. A real man doesn't rule with an iron fist. A real man leads, but he also sacrifices. The fact that Jesus did both shows that we can trust his him and submit to him as our King and Savior. And if we submit to Jesus, we'll trust what he says about submitting to merely human authorities.

This sermon has already been long enough, and though I would love to save more to defend what the Bible says, all I can say now is something that Jesus said: "wisdom is justified by all her children" (Luke 7:35). If we all trusted God's words regarding men and women, I

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<sup>3</sup> There are too many verses that speak of Jesus' lordship, his reign and rule over everything, to list here.

believe we would see a more just, well-ordered world. But it will take some time to see the results of what we do, just like it takes time to see what kind of adults children will become. I firmly believe that the fruit of our culture will be rotten. Literally, the children of a culture that rebels against God will be worse off. If we trust what God has spoken and lived accordingly, things would be better.

Here's a closing word to men and to women. Men, embrace your role as leaders, but lead lovingly. Lead in prayer. Don't dominate women, but don't also abdicate your role as leaders. I think the reason why women have become leaders is often because men refused to lead or were simply lousy leaders. All of us will lead somewhere in life. If you're married, love your wives as Jesus loved the church. If you're a leader in the church, lead according to God's word and the example of Jesus. If you're a leader at work, do the same.

Women, you are in no way inferior to men. You are made in God's image. You are very valuable in God's kingdom. Though Jesus was and is male, and though he chose male disciples, his ministry was supported by women and they witnessed his burial and his empty tomb. Women can serve in all kinds of ways in the church. They are really only barred from being pastors, or from preaching—which isn't just imparting information, but is also an authoritative task. But women can teach women and children, women can mentor women, women can serve in a variety of ways, and women have served and can serve as missionaries. Eve was told she could eat all kinds of fruit except one. Women, you can choose to serve in a variety of ways except one. Will you embrace that limitation, and look at what you can do and not at what you can't? Or will you not trust God and look at that forbidden fruit as something that is good and kept from you by God?

Really, that's a choice for all of us, both men and women. Will we trust what God's word or not? Will we accept what he has offered us, or will we bitterly want what he has forbidden? That is the great struggle for all human beings. If we trust Jesus for salvation, we will also trust God's word and design. God gives us good gifts, including the gift of being a man or a woman. Let us accept his gifts with thankful hearts and serve him in love and humility.