

---

## A Study Guide to 1 Timothy 2:8-15

# Part 3: Women Who Profess Religion

### Translation

In order to facilitate discussion, the following translation is very literal. It is arranged on the page in an outline form to help show the main points and the supporting arguments. Compare several English versions.

- 8 Therefore I want
- A. the men in every place to pray, lifting holy hands without anger or argument;
- 9 B. likewise also the women [ \_\_\_\_ to ??? \_\_\_\_ ] in orderly apparel with modesty[;]
- [C.] and with prudence to adorn themselves,
- 1. not with braids and gold or pearls or expensive clothes,
  - 10 2. but, what is fitting for women who profess religion, with good deeds.
- 11 A. Let a woman learn in quietness in all subjection;
- 12 B. But I do not permit a woman to teach or to domineer over a man,
- but to be in quietness.
  - 13 1. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.
  - 14 2. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and fell into transgression.
  - 15 • Yet she shall be saved through childbirth
  - if they remain in faith and love and holiness with prudence.
- 3:1 Faithful is the saying.

### The Pastoral Epistles

The letters to Timothy and Titus, known as the Pastoral Epistles, are a collection of letters from an older teacher (Paul) to younger ministers (Timothy and Titus). As a collection, they discuss how to be a good minister.

### Paying Heed to Public Perception

Any group that is new, foreign, or otherwise not well known can be misunderstood and criticized as “strange” or a threat to society. It is therefore important for members of the group to maintain an exemplary lifestyle in order to bring a good reputation to the group. The Pastoral Epistles are concerned about how outsiders view Christians. Look up what these letters say about bishops (1 Tim 3:2, 7; Tit 1:7); deacons (1 Tim 3:13); widows (1 Tim 5:7, 14); slaves (1 Tim 6:1); younger women (Tit 2:5); and younger men (Tit 2:8). Over and over there is concern that outsiders might “reproach,” “revile,” “say evil about” Christians, or otherwise “defame the Word of God.” Paul exhorts Christian leaders to display exemplary behavior in order to deflect such criticisms.

Christians were not the only group who were misunderstood and criticized in antiquity. The Roman philosopher Seneca in the first century worried that outsiders might misunderstand the philosophy of Stoicism. He said:

The mere name of philosophy, however quietly pursued, is an object of sufficient scorn; and what would happen if we should begin to separate ourselves from the customs of our fellow-men? Inwardly, we ought to be different in all respects, but our exterior should conform to society. Do not wear too fine, nor yet too frowzy a toga... Let us try to maintain a higher standard of life than that of the multitude, but not a contrary standard; otherwise, we shall frighten away and repel the very persons whom we are trying to improve. We also bring it about that they are unwilling to imitate us in anything, because they are afraid lest they might be compelled to imitate us in everything, etc. etc. . . . "Well then, should we act like other men? Shall there be no distinction between ourselves and the world?" Yes, a very great one; let men find that we are unlike the common herd, if they look closely (Seneca, *Moral Epistle* 5.2-3, 6, translated by Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library).

Seneca urged young philosophers to behave so that they would be noticeably different from the crowd, especially to maintain high standards of conduct. But he warned that philosophers who were too extreme in their behavior—for example, in wearing ragged clothing to show off how they had overcome greed and pride—would risk being dismissed as kooks by the crowd. No one would listen to them at all.

In a similar way, the Pastoral Epistles urge Christian leaders to maintain high standards of sexual conduct (1 Tim 3:2, 12; 5:9), yet they reject mandatory celibacy (1 Tim 4:3). If Christians insisted on celibacy for all believers, they would win very few converts! Likewise, Christian leaders should not be greedy (1 Tim 3:3, 8), but it was fine for congregations to provide financial support for their teaching elders (1 Tim 5:17). And so on. How would this principle apply to the behavior of women?

### **Women Who Profess Religion (2:8-10)**

When it comes to behavior, what is "appropriate" is often culturally determined. This text emphasizes behavior that would have been considered "appropriate" for pious women in Greco-Roman culture. There is particular emphasis on how women dress, on how one's character offers much finer decoration than jewelry or clothing. This was a common theme among ancient philosophers. Following is advice from the Platonist philosopher Plutarch in the early second century, excerpted from his essay "Advice to Bride and Groom":

19. A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions. For with no god do stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favor. . .

26. The Sicilian despot [Dionysius] sent clothing and jewelry of the costly kind to the daughters of Lysander; but Lysander would not accept them, saying, "These adornments will disgrace my daughters far more than they will adorn them." . . . It is not gold or precious stones or scarlet that makes her such, but whatever invests her with that something which betokens dignity, good behavior, and modesty. . .

32. Phidias [famous sculptor] made the Aphrodite of the Eleans with one foot on a tortoise, to typify for womankind keeping at home and keeping silence. For a woman ought to do her talking either to her husband or through her husband, and she should not feel aggrieved if, like the flute-player, she makes a more impressive sound through a tongue not her own. (Plutarch, *Moralia* 140-142, translated by F. C. Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library.)

For Plutarch, the woman should not only wear modest apparel, but she should also be absolutely loyal and devoted to her husband. If a woman joined a group or was converted to a religion of which her husband was not a member, there could be severe strife in the household.

In the case of Christianity, some early Christians apparently understood Paul to teach in 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 that celibacy was preferable to marriage, and so married couples should refrain from having sex. What if a woman converted to Christianity and stopped having sex with her pagan husband? We can see the effect of a false interpretation of Paul in a legendary story from the second century. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* purports to tell the story of one young woman whom Paul converted and who became a missionary following in his footsteps. Here is a part of the story that describes how her fiancé reacted:

7. And while Paul was thus speaking in the midst of the church in the house of Onesiphorus, a certain virgin Thecla, the daughter of Theocleia, betrothed to a man named Thamyris, sitting at the window close by, listened night and day to the discourse of virginity and prayer, and did not look away from the window, but paid earnest heed to the faith, rejoicing exceedingly...

8. And as she did not stand away from the window, her mother sent to Thamyris; and he came gladly, as if already receiving her in marriage. And Theocleia said, "I have a strange story to tell you, Thamyris, for assuredly for three days and three nights Thecla has not risen from the window, but...she is so devoted to a foreigner teaching deceitful and artful discourses, that I wonder how a virgin of such modesty is so painfully put about. 9. Thamyris, this man will overturn the city of the Iconians, and thy Thecla too besides, for all the young women and the young men go in beside him, being taught to fear God and to live in chastity..."

11. And Thamyris starting up, went forth into the street, and kept watching those going in to him and coming out. And he saw two men bitterly contending with each other, and he said, "Men tell me who this is among you, leading astray the souls of young men and deceiving virgins, so that they do not marry, but remain as they are..."

12. And Demas and Hermogenes said to him, "Who this is, indeed, we do not know; but he deprives young men of wives, and maidens of husbands, saying, 'There is for you a resurrection in no other way unless you remain chaste and pollute not the flesh, but keep it chaste.'" 14. Demas and Hermogenes said, "Bring him before the governor Castelios on the charge of persuading the multitudes to embrace the new teaching of the Christians, and he will speedily destroy him, and you will have Thecla as your wife..."

15. And Thamyris, hearing these things, being filled with anger and rage, rising up early, went to the house of Onesiphorus with archons and public officers, and a great crowd with batons, saying, "You have corrupted the city of the Iconians, and her that was betrothed to me, so that she will not have me. Let us go the governor Castelios." And all the multitude said, "Away with the magician; for he has corrupted all our wives, and the multitudes have been persuaded to change their opinions." (Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume VIII.)

The heretical teaching behind the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* seems to have been something like a problem addressed in the Pastoral Epistles. Notice that the heretics "forbid marriage" (1 Tim 4:3), and they "upset whole houses" (Titus 1:11). Against them, Paul teaches that younger widows should remarry (1 Tim 5:14) and younger women should "love their husbands" (Titus 2:4-5).

### Summary of the Situation

We see therefore that the Pastoral Epistles as a whole are concerned with protecting the church from outside criticism and misunderstanding. Such concerns seem to lie behind the instructions in 1 Timothy 2. For example, since Christians denied that the emperor was divine, they would never pray *to* him, but they could demonstrate that they are loyal citizens by praying *for* their rulers (2:1-2). In this way, Christians might hope to avoid persecution and be allowed to live "quiet and peaceable lives" (2:2). Also, the behavior of Christian men and women in worship could draw criticism if it appeared to be subversive of prevailing social customs. A wife whose husband had not converted might be criticized for no longer venerating their husband's family

gods, so she would need to deflect criticism by wearing modest clothing, adorning herself with good character, and otherwise submitting to her husband, all in accordance with the prevailing customs of the day.

The instructions for both men and women reflect common social customs of the first century. In antiquity, people prayed with hands lifted (2:8), while gold, pearls, and braids all were considered immodest apparel for women (2:9). Such customs change from society to society over time, and there is no need to lock in on such trivial matters. What is important is that Christians reflect attitudes of holiness and modesty in worship, avoiding behaviors that outsiders in their culture would deem indecent.

### **Let a Woman Learn in Quietness (2:11)**

1 Corinthians 14:34 says, “let women keep silent in the assemblies...” The Greek verb there is *sigao*, and that is the only passage in the NT that says women should be *silent*. Nevertheless, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is often mistranslated as if it said the same thing. But 1 Timothy uses a different word, *hesuchia*, which means “peace,” or “quietness.” In the same context, 1 Timothy 2:2 urges Christians to pray for rulers “that we may live a quiet and *peaceable* life,” where the word “peaceable” is *hesuchios*. Here *hesuchios* clearly does not mean “silent.” So also, the admonition in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is that women should learn in “quietness” or “peace” (*hesuchia*). That is, they should not be raising a ruckus or causing turmoil. This is not a command to be silent, though it could reflect a situation similar to that of 1 Corinthians 14, where women prophets and tongue speakers were speaking out of turn and creating a confusion in a local assembly.

### **Not to Teach or Domineer (2:12)**

1 Timothy 2:12 insists that a woman should not “teach or domineer over a man.” If we read this as an absolute prohibition against women teaching, then it clearly contradicts what we read about women elsewhere in the New Testament who are prophets (Luke 2:36; Acts 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5), missionaries (Rom 16:7), deacons (Rom 16:1; 1 Tim 3:11), and so on. (Hutson, “Laborers in the Lord.”) What situation called for this command?

In light of the context, this command was most likely an effort to ward off criticism from outsiders. In antiquity very few women were educated or trained for leadership, so that a woman teacher was a noteworthy exception to the rule and could become an excuse for outsiders to criticize her group. For example, Epicurean philosophers who trained women were regularly accused of bringing women into their classrooms only because they were prostitutes. That was malicious slander but it was widely reported, with the result that Epicureans always had an “image problem” simply because they taught women. 1 Timothy urges Christian women to behave in ways that will deflect criticism from outsiders, so that the Christian message will be heard.

Specifically, the admonition “not to teach or domineer over a man” is a *hendiadys*, an expression that uses two words to express a single idea. Here the idea is that women should not teach in a domineering manner. Immodest clothing or a domineering attitude would render their teaching ineffective, just as quarreling and strife would nullify the value of men’s prayers.

## Adam Was Formed First (2:13-15)

As in 1 Corinthians 11:2-17, this passage appeals to Genesis 2-3 for a Scriptural argument in support of a local instruction. And, as in 1 Corinthians, this passage makes an argument that is hard to follow because it is based on ancient Jewish traditions. Here are some points to consider.

First, “Adam was formed first, then Eve.” In Hebrew *adam* means “human” and not “male.” But 1 Timothy 2:13 reads as if *adam* means the first “male.” This should alert us that Paul is working within a traditional interpretation, which is not the only way to read Genesis.

Second, “Adam was not deceived, but the woman...” There was in antiquity an extensive Jewish traditional discussion about the nature of Eve’s “deception.” Many interpreters supposed that the “deception” was sexual in nature, that is, that the serpent seduced Eve. This played to a common ancient prejudice against women, that all women are lascivious and must be kept at home under careful guard lest they have sex with strange men. For our purposes, it is noteworthy that “Adam was not deceived.” Does this mean that Eve sinned in ignorance while Adam sinned knowingly? How then does this qualify all men to lead and place all women in subjection? Again, we should be aware that we are dealing with an ancient Jewish traditional interpretation of Genesis.

Finally, “she shall be saved through childbirth...” is especially difficult to understand. This too seems to reflect an ancient Jewish tradition that women *die* in childbirth because they fail to keep certain laws of Moses and traditions assigned to women (Mishnah, *Shabbat* 2:6). Notice that this goes beyond Genesis 3:15, which says that the woman will *have pain* in childbirth. In any case, Paul puts a Christian spin on the rabbinical tradition by requiring Christian virtues of “faith, love and purity” instead of keeping certain laws and customs.

This entire argument from Genesis is obscure and difficult to follow, because it draws on ancient Jewish traditions about how to interpret Scripture, traditions not familiar to us. This does not mean that the argument is not useful or that we should not study it, but it does suggest that we should be careful not to build our whole doctrine about gender in the Church on a passage that is so difficult to understand, especially since other passages clearly point to women teachers and leaders in early Christianity.

## Conclusion

The command that a woman should “not to teach or domineer over a man” is not a universal command for all congregations for all time, because such would contradict what we read elsewhere in the NT about women teachers and leaders in the churches. We should be wary of those who over-apply 2:12 as a muzzle to silence women’s voices in the Church. This passage, like much of the instruction in the Pastoral Epistles, was calculated to deflect and disarm criticism from outsiders in the social context of the first century. We should ask how our situation is like or unlike the situation described in the Pastoral Epistles, and we should ask what lessons we might learn from these letters about how to deflect criticism from our churches.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Why would it have mattered to early Christians if outsiders misunderstood or criticized them?
2. In our churches today, what behaviors tend to draw the sharpest criticism from nonbelievers?
3. Paul told the Corinthians that it was better for the unmarried not to marry (1 Cor 7:25-40), but in 1 Timothy 5:3-16, we read an instruction that younger widows should marry. Why are these instructions different?
4. Since women were not educated or trained for leadership in the ancient world, women leaders were often criticized as fakes. In our society, is a group more likely to be criticized for having women leaders or for prohibiting women leaders?

## For Further Reading

- Bassler, Jouette. "Adam, Eve, and the Pastor: The Use of Genesis 2-3 in the Pastoral Epistles." In *Genesis 1-3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden*, edited by G. A. Robbins. *Studies in Women in Religion* 27. Lewiston and Queenston: Edwin Mellen, 1988. 43-65.
- Geer, Thomas C., Jr. "Admonitions to Women in 1 Tim. 2:8-15." In *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity I*, edited by Carroll D. Osburn. Joplin: College Press, 1993. 281-302.
- Hanson, A. T. "Eve's Transgression: 1 Timothy 2.13-15." In A. T. Hanson, *Studies in the Pastoral Epistles*. London: SPCK, 1968. 65-77.
- Hutson, Christopher R. "Laborers in the Lord: Romans 16 and the women in Pauline Churches." *Leaven* 4.2 (Spring, 1996). 29-31, 40. Available online at <http://gal328.org/articles/Hutson-Laborers.html>.
- Osburn, Carroll. "Authenteo (1 Timothy 2:12)." *Restoration Quarterly* 25, 1 (1982): 1-12.
- Padgett, Alan. "Wealthy Women at Ephesus: 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in Social Context." *Interpretation* 41 (January 1987): 19-31.
- Porter, Stanley E. "What Does It Mean to be 'saved by Childbirth' (1 Timothy 2.15)?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 49 (1993). 87-102.