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Source: *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy: Women in Ministry in the Church* (1992), pp. 137-156.

Published by: Kindred Productions

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/767>

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# I PERMIT NO WOMAN TO TEACH

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John E. Toews

## **Women in Church Leadership: 1 Timothy 2:8-15**

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*Corrie ten Boom of Holland spent time in a Nazi concentration camp because of her family's involvement with hiding Jews during the war. After her release from the death camp, she set out for the United States "to carry the Gospel as a missionary to the Americans," she writes. The opportunities for speaking, however, did not come easily. "The Americans were polite and some of them were interested, but none wanted me to come and speak . . . No one was interested in a middle-aged spinster woman from Holland who wanted to preach." After the endorsement of an influential Christian man, she told her story time and again, always with an evangelistic thrust. Corrie's ministry entailed three decades of speaking in more than sixty countries, beginning in the United States. She and other women like Joni Eareckson represent a new breed of*

*female speakers whose subject matter comes primarily out of their own struggles in the Christian life. — Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, Daughters of the Church*

The critical biblical text for the question of women in ministry is 1 Timothy 2:11-15. However, its interpretation is filled with problems. The traditional reading assumes that the thrust of the passage is proper order in the church, and its point the subordination of women. An alternative interpretation argues that women are forbidden to teach only if they are unlearned or if they link teaching with sexual seduction. A third interpretation refers the passage to family relationships and not to issues of church order. [1]

### THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION: THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN

The traditional interpretation of verses 11-12 teaches that women are to be silent in the church, to be subordinate to men, not to teach in the church, and not to exercise authority over men. Two reasons are given for this interpretation. First, teaching involves the exercise of authority; it is a governing function restricted to men. Secondly, women are not to exercise authority over men. This reading of verse 12b assumes that the word *authentēin*, the only occurrence of this word in the New Testament, means "to exercise authority." Its precise meaning is ambiguous. It may forbid women to exercise authority over men, or to usurp authority from men, or to improperly use authority over men. Despite this acknowledged ambiguity, traditional interpreters understand the word to forbid all exercise of authority.

1 For a longer version of this article with documentation, see "Women in Church Leadership. 1 Timothy 2:11-15: A Reconsideration," *The Bible and the Church: Essays in Honor of Dr. David Ewert* (Kindred Press, 1988), pp. 75-93.

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The issue in verses 11-12 then, according to this interpretation, is the proper relationship of men and women in the church. Women are to be silent and not to teach in the church because such activity constitutes “exercising authority” over men.

**Verses 13-14** provide the reasons women are to be silent.

Verse 13 is believed to assert that because Adam was created first, males are superior throughout history.

Verse 14 states the cause as the fall. Eve's deception, in this reading, changed the nature of womanhood and made all women more susceptible to deception than men. Therefore, it is inappropriate for women to teach and exercise authority.

**Verse 15** is a very difficult verse, and its meaning remains uncertain. Most evangelicals struggle between reading the words “woman will be saved through child-bearing” as a reference to the birth of the Messiah, or as a statement about the proper sphere of women's activities and the good works of verse 10. Both views are problematic. The text does not speak of the Messiah, and the second view involves a theology of salvation by works that runs contrary to Paul's teaching.

### **Problems with the Traditional Interpretation**

The traditional reading has been challenged for a variety of reasons.

(1) It fails to recognize that the critical words in the text have more than one meaning, as the standard Greek dictionary indicates. The traditional interpretation reads each word in the most restrictive way possible, even when this is a secondary meaning or is consistently used differently by Paul in other passages.

(2) The traditional interpretation contradicts at least six other teachings of Paul which then must be resolved.

a. A radical differentiation between men's and women's roles contradicts the principle of the mutuality of the sexes in 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5.

b. The prohibition of women teaching contradicts Colossians 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 14:26, which state that the teaching ministry is open to all qualified believers. The word "teach" in Colossians is the same as in 1 Timothy 2. The teaching ministry is open to all on the same basis as the other ministries listed in Colossians 3: authority to forgive (v. 13), to love (v. 14), to admonish and to make music (v. 16). None are restricted on the basis of sex. Verses 18-19 differentiate instructions on the basis of gender. Thus Paul differentiates between men and women when necessary. If a ban on women teachers was important for all the churches, it would have been in order for Paul to remind the churches of this restriction in the context of a general invitation to share in Christian ministries, including teaching.

c. The prohibition of teaching contradicts the freedom for women to exercise the more authoritative ministry of prophecy. The most authoritative ministries in the New Testament are apostle, prophet, and teacher. In every catalog of the gifts (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4) teaching is always listed after prophecy. Women are free to prophesy (1 Cor. 11:5; Acts 2:16-18; 21:9). Prophecy is teaching by inspiration rather than from tradition. It is a more authoritative ministry than teaching. Apostles and prophets constitute the foundation of the church, whereas teaching is not so defined. Paul's teaching is inconsistent if 1 Timothy 2 forbids women to teach though they are free to exercise the more authoritative ministries in the church.

d. The reading of the Adam/Eve illustration contradicts Paul's other uses of Adam and Eve. Adam's crea-

tion before Eve is used only one other time in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 11:8-10. Adam's creation before Eve is declared meaningless because "in the Lord" both are interdependent. Therefore, the woman can worship God independently of the man (as long as she is appropriately dressed). Here Eve is held accountable for the fall of the human race. But in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 Adam is held responsible. Paul, therefore, sounds discordant in the traditional interpretation of 1 Timothy.

e. If the ban on women teaching is a retribution for the fall, then Adam's responsibility for the fall should involve a restriction for men. To prohibit women but not men from teaching as a judgment for the fall really means that women are excluded from full salvation because of Eve's sin. Furthermore, if the ban on women teaching is a function of the fall, there is no explanation why this ministry is chosen rather than the more authoritative ministry of prophecy.

f. Finally, this interpretation contradicts Paul's own practice of including women in his ministries. Paul names sixteen women as "co-workers" in his ministries (Rom. 16; Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 4:15; Phlm. 2; Acts 16:14-15). The terms used to describe the activities of these women are normally associated with leadership roles: "minister" (Rom. 16:1); "ruler" (Rom. 16:2); "my fellow worker in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 16:3; Phil. 4:3); "apostle" (Rom. 16:7); "worked hard in the Lord" (Rom. 16:6, 12); "contended at my side for the cause of the gospel" (Phil. 4:3); "explaining the way of the Lord more accurately" (Acts 18:26). (See Chapters 2 and 7.)

These contradictions create problems for a coherent reading of Paul. Any overall interpretation of the ministry of women in the church, and of the 1 Timothy 2

text, must create a more consistent interpretation of Paul.

(3) That this prohibition is mentioned only once in Scripture is problematic. The exclusion of women from a significant ministry is a major stance that should be repeated in other writings dealing with the exercise of ministries in the church. The texts dealing with such ministries (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4) do not hint at the exclusion of women. In fact, it is clear that women are gifted and empowered for diverse ministries of the church. The gifts and ministries of the Spirit are never differentiated on the basis of gender.

(4) The problem of verse 15 ("she shall be saved through childbirth") calls the entire traditional interpretation into question. If a key statement in any text cannot be integrated into the overall meaning of the text, as well as into the other teachings of the Scripture, that suggests the text has not been properly interpreted.

### **AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION: NO UNLEARNED WOMAN SHALL TEACH**

A series of evangelical scholars are attempting an alternative interpretation to resolve some of the problems of the traditional interpretation.

#### **The Historical Context of 1 Timothy 2:11-15**

The Pastoral Letters address problems of false teaching in young missionary churches (1 Tim. 1:3-11, 19-20; 4:1-10; 6:3-4, 20f.; 2 Tim. 1:15; 2:14, 16-18, 23; 3:1-9, 13; 4:3-4; Titus 1:10-16; 3:9-11). 1 Timothy was written to stop false teaching (1:3). It is clear that women were involved in the false teachings (1 Tim. 3:11, 5:11-15; 2 Tim. 3:6-7), and that some women were going

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from house to house spreading these teachings (1 Tim. 5:13). Young widows especially were among those influenced by the false teachers.

It is important to note that Ephesus was one of the centers of female religion in the ancient world. It was known as "the bastion of the female spiritual principle." One temple was dedicated to Artemis (or Diana) and a second to Aphrodite (Venus). The goddess Artemis represented the most powerful expression of the Great Mother. She took second place to no other god. In the religious culture of Ephesus, woman was created before man. The role of the male in procreation was unimportant. Descent was claimed through the mother. The genealogy of the mother, not the father, provided a person with rank. Women were thought to possess special affinity for the divine and served as mediators between the human and the divine. Sacred prostitution, therefore, was a special feature of religion in Ephesus and of the divine/human mediation. Temple prostitution effected a union with the goddess, thus bringing salvation and fertility. Ephesus boasted thousands of prostitutes.

By the end of the first century, a gnostic world view was taught in Ephesus. This view stated that female activity was responsible for the creation of the universe, and that Eve pre-existed Adam, who was created from her side. She could procreate without Adam and she was his instructor. In addition, laws in Ephesus forbade women, with the exception of prostitutes, to wear the adornment forbidden to Christian women in 1 Timothy 2:9.

Finally, a general link between teaching and sexual activity existed in the ancient world. Male teachers engaged in homosexuality with male students. Female



teachers concluded their teaching by announcing their availability for sex with their students.

We must remember that 1 Timothy was written to a church in a culture dominated by false teaching and a focus on female sexuality. Paul was attempting to correct situations that involved women serving as false teachers, acting immorally, dressing as prostitutes, and arguing about questions of origins (genealogies).

### **The Literary Context of 1 Timothy 2:11-15**

Chapter 2 begins with “therefore” followed by instructions that are a consequence of the concern for combating false teaching in Chapter 1. The thesis of Chapter 2 is that the gospel is for all people (vv. 1, 4-6, 7). Therefore, the first order of business is offering prayers for all people, including the authorities.

In verse 8 the concern shifts to particular controversies in Ephesus affecting the credibility of the gospel. The main issue is improper conduct: men are gathering for prayer but fighting instead. Women are dressing inappropriately, teaching before they are knowledgeable, and linking their teaching to sexual activity.

The issue of teaching is preceded by an exhortation regarding proper dress. The critical concern of the adornment texts is fidelity in marriage. Women's adornment and submission to husbands are linked in common instructions in the ancient world. They are two sides of the same coin. The adornment texts uniformly speak in favor of modest clothes and of a wife's submission to her husband. Expensive adornment was a sign of sexual infidelity, and in Ephesus the adornment question was also linked to prostitution.

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### The Meaning of the Words in 1 Timothy 2:11-15

The standard New Testament Greek dictionary indicates that interpreters must make important choices of meaning for the key words in this text. Optional meanings are indicated in the order of preference given in the dictionary.

The word translated "silence" in verses 11 and 12 means (1) quietness, as in peace or harmony, or (2) quiet, as in silence. The word "subjection," also in verse 11, is a military term that means "in order." It is concerned with the right "lining up" of troops for battle. Properly ordered troops are said to be "in subjection."

"I am not allowing" (v. 12) is the primary meaning of *epitrepo*. But the secondary meaning, "order" or "instruct," is preferred when the word is used with the infinitive form of the verb. "To teach" and "to sexually seduce" ("to exercise authority" in the traditional interpretation) are infinitives. So in verse 12 the word has something to do with proper ordering or lining up.

The critical word in verse 12 is *authentain*, traditionally translated as "to exercise authority." It is a compound word from "self" and "thrust." The basic meaning is "to thrust oneself." The word went through three stages of meaning in the ancient world. The earliest meaning is to "commit murder or suicide," that is, to thrust a weapon into someone. The second stage of meaning, from 300 B.C. to A.D. 300 (the period of our text) is to "thrust oneself sexually" or to "desire sexually." This meaning is used in an intertestamental writing known as the Wisdom of Solomon 12:6. John Chrysostom, one of the earliest church fathers to comment on 1 Timothy 2:12, translates the text as "I forbid a woman to teach and to engage in fertility practices with a man." Another early church father, Clement of

Alexandria (A.D. 200), uses the word with the same meaning. The third stage of meaning, which begins around A.D. 300, is to “thrust oneself to rule” or to “usurp authority.” Traditional interpreters have taken a later meaning and read it back into the New Testament, but the word must be defined by the usage of its period, and thus refers to sexual intercourse in the text.

The “for” at the beginning of verse 13 is normally an explanatory term, not a causal word as in the traditional interpretation. It introduces an explanation or illustration, not a statement of cause; it means “for example” not “because.” The other “double meaning” word in verse 13 is the word “created.” It can mean (1) to create something or (2) to form with understanding. Thus, it can refer to Adam’s creation by God or to his education by God.

The word “saved” in verse 15 normally means “preserved for good” or “preserved from disaster and affliction.” In the New Testament, and especially in Paul, it most often refers to “salvation from sin and death,” but it can still be used in its secular sense.

### **The Meaning of 2:11-15**

**Verse 11** - “Let a woman be disciplined peacefully in all orderliness.”

The lead sentence states that women are to be disciplined and taught. This instruction represents a radical teaching in the ancient world. With a few exceptions, women were not taught. But in the church, women are to be taught.

Women’s learning is to be characterized by two things. They are to learn peacefully or harmoniously. The connotation of silence is not present. Secondly, the learning is to be orderly. Submission is not the issue,

but orderliness in learning. Women are to be learners during their instructional times; they are not to assert themselves prematurely as teachers.

This teaching addresses the style of female worship in the ancient world. The worship of women was different from that of men. They often worshiped different gods in different temples on different days and in different ways. Women were noisy and uninhibited in worship while the men were sedate and silent. The worship of women was often indecent and indiscreet. When these women became Christians, they had to learn a different mode of worship.

**Verse 12** - "And I am not lining up (or I am not permitting) a woman to teach or to sexually seduce a man, but to be in peacefulness."

Though Paul is instructing women in Ephesus not to teach, the verb "lining up" here does not refer to a continuing state. Paul, more than any other New Testament writer, separated his personal advice for a particular situation from permanently valid instruction. He identifies a command of the Lord as such (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:6, 10, 12, 25, 40), or he explicitly states a command to be observed in all the churches (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:16; 14:33, 34, 36). In contrast, when Paul gave personal advice, he used the first person singular verb form (e.g., 1 Cor 7:6, 7, 8, 12, 17, 25, 26, 28, 29, 32, 35, 40). In verse 12 Paul uses the typical verbal form for giving personal counsel. It is his advice for the particular situation in Ephesus, and cannot be generalized into a command for all time. Paul could have written "I will never permit" if that is what he intended. Furthermore, when Paul does specify a timeless instruction, he usually indicates this with phrases such as "in behalf of all" (1 Tim. 2:1) or "in every place" (1 Tim. 2:8). He gives no indication that the

instruction for women not to teach is to be understood as a continuing prohibition. Rather, he is offering instruction for the particular situation in Ephesus.

The word “teach” can refer to authoritative Christian teaching, to teaching one another, to human teaching, or to Jewish teaching. The teaching described here is teaching one another. Paul does not want unlearned women to be teaching men. More specifically, Paul does not want women to be teaching men and sexually seducing them, which was the practice in the church in Thyatira (Rev. 2:20). Instead, the women are to be peaceful or harmonious. They are to be in the community as gracious learners, not seductive teachers.

Clearly the instruction of verses 11-12 is that women be peaceful learners because it is the first thing said in verse 11 and the last thing said in verse 12. A literal translation indicates the poetic structure of the text and underlines this emphasis:

A woman in *peacefulness* let learn  
in all orderliness  
to teach not I am lining up  
nor to sexually seduce a man  
but to be in *peacefulness*.

**Verses 13-14** - “For example, Adam was formed with understanding first, and then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived having become a transgressor.”

The example of Adam and Eve offers a Jewish commentary on the creation story. The example makes one point, not two, as in most commentaries. The issue is education as a safeguard against deception. Creation and then the fall are not two different events and causes. Adam was taught first; his understanding was formed

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first, and then Eve's. In other words, verses 13-14 present a statement about the order of Adam's and Eve's education, not the order of their creation. Adam was not deceived because he knew better. Eve was misled because she was not properly taught. Adam's being created first makes him more knowledgeable and thus more responsible, not more righteous.

The point of the illustration is that women must be taught or they will again be led astray, as in fact was happening (5:15). This interpretation fits the one other reference to Eve's being deceived, 2 Corinthians 11:3. There Eve is an illustration of the dangers of being led astray by unauthorized teachers.

**Verse 15** - "And she will be saved by means of the childbearing if they remain in faith and love and holiness with reasonable judgment."

"Saved" is used here in its non-theological meaning, to preserve from natural dangers and afflictions, to keep in good condition.

But from what will the woman be preserved in child-bearing? Interpreters have offered two proposals. First, she will be preserved from the theological barrier that outlaws her from teaching. In childbearing woman demonstrates her divinely ordered preeminence over man, even as man's prior creation and education shows his preeminence over woman. Paul's argument here is interpreted as similar to 1 Corinthians 11:8-9. Woman is saved from her subordinate status by bearing children. Woman assumes a prior position to the man as his source. While woman is created and educated second, she is first in the birthing sequence. Childbearing then serves the healing function of counterbalancing man's prior creation and education.

Although such reasoning seems strange to us, it shows that Paul was struggling to express a fundamental equality between the sexes in categories that were understandable at that time. Each sex is logically prior in equally significant, but different, ways.

The second proposal interprets salvation to mean protection in the intensified pain of the birthing process. That is, salvation addresses the pain of the curse in Genesis 3.

Whatever the precise object of the salvation, the verse concludes by promising woman's full restoration if women and men—"they" (plural, not singular as at the beginning of the verse)—live faithfully.

Verses 11-15, therefore, teach that women are to be educated before they teach. Women are forbidden to teach if they are unlearned or if they link teaching with sexual seduction.

### **An Assessment of the Debate**

The nontraditional interpretation provides an historical context for the concern of the text. It takes seriously the ambiguous language used, and it resolves the problem of contradictions with other Pauline teachings. The interpretation of verse 15 offers more hope of contextual meaning. On strictly interpretive and exegetical grounds, this reading is preferable to the traditional one.

But the debate illustrates a critical problem in interpretation. Evangelical scholars are unable to agree on what Paul is saying. This lack of interpretive consensus is an evangelical family affair; it is not an evangelical/liberal dispute. Most critical scholars resolve the problems in the alternative interpretations by declaring 1 Timothy non-Pauline and nonauthoritative for the

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church. The evangelical community is deeply divided over the real meaning of 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Are women only prohibited from teaching men, or are they prohibited from teaching anyone? Does the prohibition apply to women everywhere in all times, or only to women addressed in the culturally specific situation of first-century Ephesus? The wide and intensive disagreements among evangelical scholars indicates that both readings are problematic. When two alternative readings of the text are so diametrically opposite, they usually share a common assumption which if challenged creates the possibility of a different reading.

### **ANOTHER POSSIBLE READING: A CONCERN FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

The traditional and the nonrestrictive interpretations are built on one common assumption: both assume that verses 11-15 concern public worship. This assumption is based on two more assumptions. First, verses 1-7 refer to prayer in public worship, and secondly, the exhortation for men to pray with hands lifted refers to public prayer. "In every place" in verse 8 is assumed to mean "every place where the church gathers for worship." The rest of the chapter is read as a discussion of public worship on the basis of these assumptions.

#### **A Challenge to the Common Assumption**

The assumption ought to be challenged on at least six grounds.

(1) In the Old Testament and Judaism, the father, as head of the family, led prayers for the household and taught the members of the extended family. Everything



exhorted in Chapter 2:1ff. is instruction given to fathers.

(2) "In every place" is used three other times by Paul (1 Thes. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 2:4), and never means "whenever the church gathers for worship," nor is it a synonym for "in every church." The phrase refers to the world, to every place where the action described is occurring. In 1 Timothy 2:8 Paul is talking about men praying wherever they are. Nothing suggests a public worship context.

(3) Who is to submit in verse 11 has never been clear. The Adam and Eve illustration suggests the wife is to submit to the husband. But scholars have assumed it is men in general. Nothing in the context, however, suggests the reference is anything other than the husband of the Adam and Eve illustration.

(4) The singular "she" in verses 11-15a has always puzzled scholars. It should be plural for women in public worship.

(5) The linkage between adornment/sexual fidelity and marital submission in the adornment texts has been ignored by nearly all interpreters.

(6) The shift from the singular "she" to the plural "they" in verse 15 has troubled scholars. The assumption is that the shift is from woman as singular to women as plural. Thus, if women as a collective body will live by faith, love and holiness, they will be saved.

### **A New Reading**

I suggest that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 refers to family relationships.

**Verse 8** - The lifting of hands in prayer is a common practice in Judaism whether in public or private prayer. Husbands are exhorted to pray with proper posture and disposition.

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**Verses 9-10** - The issue of the adornment of women is concerned with husband/wife relationships. Wives are to live monogamously with their husbands.

**Verse 11** - The words translated “woman” in verses 11 and 12 and “man” in verse 12 are the common words for wife and husband. The only exhortation in the New Testament for women to “be submissive,” and “to order themselves appropriately,” is to married women (Eph. 5:24; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1). Husbands are to teach their wives. Wives are to learn peacefully and without the use of sexual manipulation.

It is hard to imagine how radical this teaching was in the ancient world. The home was the private domain, literally, the “domain of the idiot.” The public assembly, called the *ecclesia* (our word for church), was a place of higher education. The home was the center of a woman's power, the public place was the center of a man's power. The two did not intersect. Besides Paul, only a few men like Musonius Rufus, a Roman philosopher of Paul's time, issue a radical challenge that women be treated as fully equal with men and that they be educated. Both assert that the public sphere should be moved into the private.

Paul wants to give content to the marital relationship. That also is a radical stance. It was common for men to be 30 or more years of age at the time of marriage and for women to be in their teens. Paul's exhortation for husbands to teach their young wives is revolutionary.

**Verse 12-13** - The relationship between husband and wife is illustrated in the example of Adam and Eve. When Eve, who was uninformed because of her subsequent creation, taught Adam, she led herself and Adam astray.

**Verse 15** - The reference to salvation through child-bearing is a promise either that the wife will be saved from her subordinate status by childbearing or that she will be preserved from disaster in childbearing. The plural pronoun of verse 15b refers to the husband and wife, picking up the idea of Adam and Eve from the previous statement. The wife will be preserved in childbirth if the husband and wife together live by faith, love and holiness. Christian discipleship is the equal responsibility of the husband and wife together.

### **Proposed Translation of 2:8-15**

Verse 8 - I wish, therefore, the husbands to pray in every place lifting holy hands without anger or disputation.

Verse 9 - Likewise, also wives dress with good taste and modesty and dress with good judgment, not with plaited hair and gold or pearls or expensive clothes,

Verse 10 - but as fitting wives who promise godliness through good works.

Verse 11 - Let a wife be disciplined peacefully in all orderliness.

Verse 12 - And I am not permitting a wife to teach or sexually manipulate her husband, but to be in peacefulness.

Verses 13-14 - For example, Adam was formed with understanding first and then Eve. And Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived having become a transgressor.

Verse 15 - And she (the wife) shall be saved through child-bearing if they (husband and wife) remain in faith and love and holiness with good judgment.

## Summary

The focus of the text is on the husband/wife relationship, not public worship. Therefore, this text ought not to be used to address the question of women's roles in public ministry. The point of the text is that the unlearned wife is to be taught by her husband, thus giving theological content to the marriage relationship. She is not to teach her husband or to link teaching him with sexual manipulation. Furthermore, the wife should not participate in prostitution, sacred or otherwise, but live faithfully with her husband as together they seek to be true disciples of Jesus.

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