

SERMON SERIES ON GENRES OF THE BIBLE

**Is it safe (for women) to read the Epistles?**

**A troubling text – 1 Tim 2:8-15**

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**A. Introduction**

We continue our series on genres of the Bible. It’s important to know what kind of literature we are reading so we can apply the right type of tools to interpret it. Over the course of the summer, we have demonstrated that the different biblical genres—law, poetry, poetry, parable, apocalyptic—require different assumptions and reading strategies. Today, we will look at reading the NT epistles and, in particular, a difficult passage from 1 Timothy.

**B. The Epistles**

An epistle refers to a letters. Epistles refer to letters written to specific people by Paul, James, Peter, or John. How many? 21

<b>Pauline</b>		<b>Non-Pauline</b>
<b>Romans</b>	<b>1 Thessalonians</b>	<b>Hebrews</b>
<b>1 Corinthians</b>	<b>2 Thessalonians</b>	<b>James</b>
<b>2 Corinthians</b>	<b>1 Timothy</b>	<b>1 Peter</b>
<b>Galatians</b>	<b>2 Timothy</b>	<b>2 Peter</b>
<b>Ephesians</b>	<b>Titus</b>	<b>1 John</b>
<b>Philippians</b>	<b>Philemon</b>	<b>2 John</b>
<b>Colossians</b>		<b>3 John</b>
		<b>Jude</b>

**1. Similar structure**

- 1) Name of writer (e.g., Paul)
- 2) Name of recipient (e.g., to the church in Corinth)
- 3) Greeting (e.g., grace and peace to you from God our Father)
- 4) Prayer or thanksgiving (e.g., I always thank God for you)
- 5) Body

- 6) Farewell (e.g, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you)

## 2. Occasional writings

There is one thing the Epistles have in common: They are *occasional writings*; that is, they address a *specific situation* in a *specific location* in the *first century*.<sup>1</sup>

Even though they are inspired by the Holy Spirit—and therefore belong to all time—they were written in the specific context of the author and recipients in their *language* in their *culture* in their *location* in their *time*.

So the Epistles address specific problems. However, we only have the “answers” and usually have to guess about what the problems or questions were. And it is precisely these factors that make their interpretation difficult at times.

## 3. Guidelines for interpretation

### a. What did it mean (back then)?

When reading epistles, we need to ask: What was the author’s original intent? To discover that, we need to explore a series of questions:

- 1) Language (translation)? What do the words mean? What variations does the syntax allow?
- 2) What is the literary context? Read the letter paragraph by paragraph and try to follow the author’s logic.
- 3) What is the historical context? What was the issue? False teachers? Immorality? Idolatry? Conflict?
- 4) What were the cultural factors? Class and gender status; educational levels; religious practices; dress codes; etc.

### b. Does it have an application (for us now)?

When we share similar life situations with the first-century setting the Word to them is the same to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Second Edition, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 48.

**C. A troubling text: 1 Tim 2:8-15**

1 Tim 2:8-15 is a troubling text, because it seems to restrict women and place them in a subordinate role to men. We will look at two interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

- The popular view: Women are subordinate to men; not allowed to teach or preach.
- Alternative view: The text forbids women to teach *only if* they are uneducated.

**D. A Popular view: "I permit no woman to teach"****1. Verses 11-12: Women not to have authority over men**

The popular interpretation of verses 11-12 is women are to be:

- subordinate to men,
- silent in the church, and
- not permitted to have authority over men.

This precludes women from teaching or preaching in the church. Women cannot be pastors or ministers.

This reading assumes that the word, *authenteō*—which only occurs here in the NT—means, "to exercise authority over" or "to dominate." However, its precise meaning is ambiguous.

Still, despite the ambiguity of the term, the popular interpretation prevails.<sup>3</sup> One commentator wrote: Women are to lead a quiet life, stay at home and mind their business. Women are still allowed to teach, but not over men.

**2. Verses 13-14: Two reasons**

Verses 13 and 14 provide two reasons why women are not to exercise authority over men.

**a. Adam was first/better**


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<sup>2</sup> Much of the following comes from John E. Toews, "I permit no woman to teach," in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1992) 137-56.

<sup>3</sup> Some traditionalists will argue that women are subordinate to men. As 1 Cor 11:2 states: The head of woman is man. Other traditionalists will argue the men and women are equal (Complementarian View).

Verse 13 asserts that Adam was created *first* he had priority over the woman. The word for *first* is *prōtos*, which can mean, "first, best, most important." Adam was more important Eve.

#### **b. Eve was deceived**

Verse 14 states the cause of the fall. The woman (Eve) was deceived and changed the nature of womanhood. Thus all women became more susceptible to deception than men.

### **3. Verse 15: Women have their role**

The meaning of verse 15 is uncertain. The phrase, "woman will be saved through child bearing," could refer to (1) the birth of the messiah or (2) through childbearing.

Both views have problems. Nevertheless, many Christians argue that verse 15 reveals the *proper role* of women—childbearing. Women should continue in their role as mothers and they should not seek the role of authority assigned to men.

### **4. Problems with the popular view**

#### **a. Key words**

It popular view fails to recognize that key words in the passage have more than one meaning. Key words are read in the most restrictive way.

#### **b. Contradicts six teachings of Paul**

The popular interpretation contradicts six teachings of Paul.

##### **(1) Contradicts Paul's "mutuality of the sexes"**

Paul argues for the *mutuality of the sexes* in Eph 5:20ff and 1 Cor 11:11-12.

**Eph 5:21-25.** <sup>21</sup>Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. <sup>22</sup> Wives [submit] to your husbands as to the Lord... 5:25 Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church...

**(2) Contradicts Paul's encouragement for all to teach**

There is no hint that teaching is restricted by sex in Colossians 3:16 or Corinthians 14:25. The word for *teach* (*didaskō*) is the same in 1 Tim 1:11 and Col 3:16.

**Col. 3:16.** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

**(3) Contradicts Paul's encouragement for all to prophesy**

Paul encourages women to prophesy—which is a more authoritative gift than teaching (1 Cor 11:5; Acts 2:16-18; 21:9). Prophecy is teaching by inspiration rather than by tradition.<sup>4</sup>

**1 Cor 14:1.** Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy. (NRSV)

**(4) Contradicts what Paul teaches about the interdependence of Adam and Eve**

**1 Cor 11:11-12.** 11:11 Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. 11:12 For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. (NRSV)

1 Cor 11:8-10 says that Adam's creation before Eve doesn't matter. Both males and female are interdependent, one coming from the other and vice versa.

**(5) Fails to consider what Paul taught about Adam responsibility for the fall**

Adam is held accountable for the fall of the human race in Rom 5:18-19 and 1 Cor 15:22.

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<sup>4</sup> The call to prophesy is not restricted by gender any more than love it (cf. 1 Cor 14:1).

**Rom 5:18-19.** 5:18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 5:19 For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

### **(6) Contradicts Paul's inclusion of women in ministry.**

Paul included women in his ministries. Paul names 16 women as "co-workers."<sup>5</sup> (Rom 16; Phil 4:2-3; Col 4:15; Phlm. 2; Acts 16:14-15).

#### **c. Conclusion**

Because of the apparent contradictions between 1 Tim 2:14 and what we find elsewhere in Paul's writing, the popular interpretation is probably wrong. We need to look at the hermeneutical factors.

## **E. Hermeneutical factors**

### **1. Historical context**

#### **a. False teaching**

1 & 2 Timothy and Titus all address the problem of false teaching in the churches.

**1 Tim 5:13.** Besides that, they [certain widows] learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say.

1 Timothy was written to stop false teaching and to stop certain women going from house to house spreading these teachings.

#### **b. Female goddess worship**

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<sup>5</sup> So Toews, 141.

Ephesus was one of the centers for the worship of female deities in the ancient world.

In the religious world of Ephesus, women were thought to have special contact with the Mother Goddess and served as divine mediators. The religious myths in Ephesus had woman created before man. Eve pre-existed Adam, who was created from her side, and Eve was Adam's teacher.

In addition, temple prostitution helped bring prosperity, salvation, and fertility. Ephesus boasted of having thousands of prostitutes. The prostitutes wore special clothing and adornment, which was forbidden to other women. This distinguished the temple prostitutes.

So, 1 Timothy was written to a church that was threatened by false teaching and living in a culture dominated by a focus on female sexuality,

## 2. Literary context

The literary context of our passage concerns proper conduct in public worship settings. As 1 Timothy reveals:

- (1) Men were gathering for prayer, but fighting instead (2:8).
- (2) Women were dressing inappropriately (like cult prostitutes) and teaching before they had received education (2:9) and, possibly, sexually thrusting themselves at men (2:11-12).<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Word Meanings

There are four key terms that are debated.<sup>7</sup>

### a. Silence Peace (*hēsychia*)

In verses 11 and 12, the word translated "silence" is the Greek word, *hēsychia*. It can mean (1) It can refer to not speaking, as in silence. (2) But it can also refer to peace, peacefulness, quietness, harmony, or tranquility.

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<sup>6</sup> So Toews. It depends on how one translates *authenteō*

<sup>7</sup> Alternative word meanings are from Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds.) *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*. United Bible Societies. Computer Version 1992-1994.

**b. Submission Order (*hypotagē*)**

In verse 11, the word translated “submission” is the Greek word, *hypotagē*.<sup>8</sup> It is a military term that means “in order” and it is concerned with troops “lining up” for battle. Women are to be ordered with or lined up with men in their education.

**c. ~~To have authority over~~ To thrust oneself on (*authenteō*)**

A third critical term is found in verse 12. The word translated “to have authority over” is the Greek word, *authenteō*. It is a compound word from “self” and “thrust”—*to thrust oneself*. It has several possible meanings, ranging from (1) to thrust oneself sexually to (2) thrust oneself over someone—to domineer or to rule over.

**d. ~~Formed~~ Educated (*plassō*)**

A fourth critical term is in verse 13. The word translated “formed”—Adam was formed first—is the word *plassō*. The word *plassō* can refer to forming with understanding. So it could be a reference to Adam being created by God or to Adam being educated by God.

**F. Alternative view: “Let woman learn in peace”****1. Verse 11—“Let a woman peacefully learn in all orderliness”**

This represents a radical statement in the ancient world. With few exceptions, women were not taught in the ancient world. The education of women was to be characterized by two things.

First, women were to learn peacefully. It is not saying women should be silent.

Second, women are to receive learning in an orderly fashion. Perhaps this means that women were to be given the same instruction as men, to be ordered with, or aligned with, men as if going into battle.

**2. Verse 12—“And I do not permit a woman to teach or thrust herself on a man, but to be in peace.”**

<sup>8</sup> It is a compound word from *hypo*, “by means of,” and *tagē*, “arrangement”.

Paul is giving personal advice to a local church. Paul distinguished between *giving his personal advice* (1 Cor 7:12) and *giving instruction from the Lord* (1 Cor 7:10) When Paul gives his opinion, he uses the first person singular, "I".

So, Paul is offering *his personal take* on the issue. He is not saying, "I never permit."

Moreover, it sounds like Paul defending the practice of teaching women in the church, which would have opened the church to criticism and hostility. So he is drawing limits.

### **3. Verses 13-14—"Adam was educated with understanding first..."**

Verses 13-14 provide an example or a midrash on the creation story and it makes one point: *Education safeguards against deception*.

Adam's understanding was formed [*plassō*] first; then Eve's. This verses 13-14 provide a commentary on Adam and Eve's education, not their order of creation.

Eve was deceived because she had not been properly taught. The point of the illustration is that women must be taught, so that they will not be lead astray.

### **4. Verse 15—"Eve will be saved through childbearing..."**

It is difficult to understand Paul's thought. No doubt Paul is continuing his midrash on the biblical story of Eve's deception by the serpent. Salvation comes through childbearing.

### **5. Thrust of the Alternative View**

Paul is addressing unique culturally specific problems in Ephesus. Women are to receive education in an orderly and peaceful fashion. But women are not to teach (if they are unlearned). Education protects against deception its consequences.