

PUTTING WOMEN IN THEIR PLACE: 1 TIMOTHY 2 AND EVANGELICAL VIEWS OF WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

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The battle over women in ministerial leadership is not going away. Egalitarians may have gained the upper hand—or at least J. I. Packer may have thought so when, in summarizing the colloquium that produced the book *Women, Authority and the Bible*, he declared that “the burden of proof regarding the exclusion of women from the office of teaching and ruling within the congregation now lies on those who maintain the exclusion rather than on those who challenge it.”¹ But any suspicions that defenders of the traditional position might capitulate were dispelled when the newly-formed Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (hereafter CBMW) announced its existence and set forth its “Danvers Statement,” first published in November 1988.²

The statement speaks admirably and eloquently in several areas that are relatively noncontroversial among evangelicals, such as sexual morality, family relationships, and the value of motherhood. And the CBMW distances itself from those who have “wrongly neglected informed participation by women” in home and church. But when it turns to the question of women in church leadership, even though the statement recognizes “the genuine evangelical standing of many who do not agree with all of our convictions,” it proclaims the perniciousness of contemporary reinterpretations of Scripture. Here are the last four of the ten developments in contemporary society that the CBMW cites as rationale for its work:

7. the emergence of roles for men and women in church leadership that do not conform to Biblical teaching but *backfire in the crippling of Biblically faithful witness*;
8. the increasing prevalence and acceptance of *hermeneutical oddities* devised to reinterpret apparently plain meanings of Biblical texts;

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¹ J. Packer, “Understanding the Differences,” in *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed. A. Mickelsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 298.

² The Danvers Statement, accompanied by a description of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and a list of its members, appeared in *Christianity Today* (January 13, 1989) 40-41. All quotations of CBMW statements in this article come from this two-page advertisement.

9. the consequent threat to Biblical authority as the clarity of Scripture is jeopardized and the accessibility of its meaning to ordinary people is withdrawn into the restricted realm of *technical ingenuity*;
10. and behind all this the *apparent accommodation of some within the church to the spirit of the age* at the expense of winsome, radical Biblical authenticity which in the power of the Holy Spirit may reform rather than reflect our ailing culture (*italics mine*).

The statement goes on to affirm that “some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men” and that “in both men and women a heartfelt sense of call to ministry should never be used to set aside Biblical criteria for particular ministries.” It then concludes by returning to an ominous key: “We are convinced that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.”

The CBMW will have trouble mustering the “widespread assent” it hopes the Danvers Statement will find in the evangelical world. But at least the response will be somewhat warmer than if the CBMW had targeted mainline Protestantism for attack. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), has not stopped at legitimizing women’s ordination, but has actually gone so far as to make it compulsory: Each congregation must have female representation in each year’s contingent of incoming elders. When a Presbyterian church near my home resisted, the presbytery sent an ecclesiastical commission out to berate the congregation until it agreed to nominate woman elders.

Most mainline Presbyterians feel no compunction about ignoring the Pauline texts that seem to circumscribe the legitimacy of female leadership in the Church. This lowered view of Biblical authority has also slipped at times into evangelical or semi-evangelical literature.³ Generally, though, evangelicals’ understanding of the inspired nature of the NT precludes them from saying Paul was wrong. Most evangelical egalitarians, therefore, have affirmed that Paul was right but have attempted to deny that he was talking about what traditionalist interpreters think he was talking about.

In this struggle 1 Timothy 2 plays the central role. On one hand, I think it can be fairly stated that the evangelical argument for excluding women from leadership would be very lame—in fact, it might never have come into existence—without this passage. For the only other NT passage that “specifically restrict[s] the ministry of women,”⁴ 1 Cor 14:33–34, is muddied by the fact that Paul also explicitly affirms, in the same section, women’s right to prophesy in church meetings.⁵ On the other hand, 1 Timothy 2 is clear in

³ See P. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); V. Mollenkott, *Women, Men and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

⁴ W. Liefeld, “Women, Submission and Ministry in 1 Corinthians,” in *Women, Authority and the Bible* 149.

⁵ I am aware of Wayne Grudem’s claim that permitting women to prophesy does not necessarily permit them to teach (see W. Grudem, “Prophecy—Yes, But Teaching—No: Paul’s Consistent Advocacy of Women’s Participation without Governing Authority,” *JETS* 30 [March

its language, and the egalitarians' efforts to reinterpret the passage's intent have often seemed contrived—"hermeneutical oddities," as our CBMW colleagues have termed them.

Fully aware that the hypothetical nature of their reconstructions of 1 Timothy 2 remains their Achilles' heel, egalitarians have sought to neutralize this frontal assault by outflanking their opponents. That is, while awaiting a satisfactory exegesis of the passage they seek to hamstring their critics by pointing out that Gal 3:28 ("In Christ there is . . . neither male nor female") is just as clear and justifiable a point of departure on the topic as 1 Timothy 2, that Paul named women leaders and affirmed their ministries several times in the NT, and that if traditionalists want to treat 1 Tim 2:11-12 as normative for today they should also be telling men to lift their hands when they pray (1 Tim 2:8) and resuscitating the category of older widows as a special group in the Church (1 Timothy 5).⁶

All this helps the egalitarian cause, but a convincing, comprehensive reading of 1 Timothy 2 is still needed. The most promising effort has come from classicist Catherine Kroeger, but her major work on the passage, presented in 1984 and published in 1986,⁷ has not been pursued further. Since the parallels between gnosticism and the concerns addressed in 1 Timothy are multiple and striking, an attempt to extend Kroeger's insights should bear much fruit. In this paper I intend to add several pieces to the puzzle she began to fit together, so as to complete what I believe is a plausible reconstruction of the passage. As I have deep respect for holders of the traditional view and an equally deep concern for intra-evangelical peacemaking, however, I will conclude by returning to the contemporary scene and making a few observations.

Though often viewed primarily as handbooks for church government and order, the pastoral epistles appear to be motivated by a more overarching purpose: to give church leaders wisdom on how to keep heresy from derailing their churches.⁸ The two letters to Timothy give considerable, albeit incomplete, evidence of particular problems with which the author may have had to deal. After a generic call to "fight the good fight" against teachers of false doctrine (1 Tim 1:3, 18), 1 Timothy cites two blasphemers by name (1:20) and warns against endless genealogies (1:4), false asceticism

1987] 11-23). I question, however, whether this argument would have arisen were there not other reasons—predominantly, if not solely, 1 Timothy 2—to presume that Paul still wished to exclude women from teaching roles.

⁶ See e.g. G. Bilezikian, "Hierarchist and Egalitarian Inculturations," *JETS* 30 (December 1987) 425-426; D. Scholer, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation," *JETS* 30 (December 1987) 418; R. Pierce, "Male/Female Leadership and Korah's Revolt: An Analogy?," *JETS* 30 (March 1987) 4-5; G. Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents," *JETS* 28 (June 1985) 146, 150. The most complete listing I have seen of the voluminous evangelical literature on women in leadership can be found in the notes to D. Scholer, "1 Timothy 2:9-15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," in *Women, Authority and the Bible* 193-219.

⁷ C. Kroeger, "1 Timothy 2:12—a Classicist's View," in *Women, Authority and the Bible* 225-244.

⁸ See Fee, "Reflections."

(4:3), godless myths (4:7), conceited and self-aggrandizing controversy-makers (6:3-5), and the "opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge" (6:20). One of the victims of excommunication in 1:20, Hymenaeus, is named again in 2 Tim 2:17 (though with a new partner) and attacked for arguing that the resurrection has already happened.

While some of the trouble appears to have Jewish origins (see the references to the law in 1 Tim 1:7-11), most of these problems smack distinctly of ancient gnosticism. The gnostic schools that had developed by the second century A.D. featured, among their distinctive teachings, (1) intricate mythic cosmogonies, (2) a contempt for material things (as creations of a lower, evil god), (3) a dependence on knowledge, not faith, as the way to salvation and, in some cases, (4) hints that the soul could be liberated even now through this secret knowledge, without having to wait for bodily death.⁹ These four features may match the denunciations occurring in (respectively) 1 Tim 1:4, 4:3-5, 6:20, and 2 Tim 2:18, as described in the previous paragraph. In particular, the argument in 4:3-4 that the foods from which false teachers abstained were created by God and that "everything God created is good" would seem specifically formulated to refute claims that the physical creation is evil or the product of someone less than God.¹⁰

If we now turn to what gnostics said about women, we find not only a tendency to elevate women as favored instruments of revelation but also an ingenious reinterpretation of the Adam and Eve story to fit gnostic presuppositions. In accordance with their glorification of knowledge as the path to salvation, gnostics reinterpreted the Genesis story so as to make Eve a heroine. In fact in one gnostic account Adam, after taking the fruit from Eve, is enlightened and thanks her for giving him life.¹¹

We can suspect, then, that this is why Paul refers to Adam and Eve in 1 Timothy 2. It is not that he wishes to call upon some timeless principle of creation, as traditionalists have argued.¹² Rather, the heretical women in Ephesus have already forced the issue by drawing on the gnostic myth cited above or on something like it so as to claim Eve's chronological and intellectual superiority to Adam as a precedent for their own self-appointed mission.¹³

⁹ For extensive documentation on these points see K. Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1984).

¹⁰ The multiple parallels between 1 Timothy and gnosticism respond, insofar as is possible, to W. Liefeld's concern that since our knowledge of gnosticism comes largely from later manuscripts it is "precarious" to assume a gnostic background for a NT text (Liefeld, "Response to Kroeger," in *Women, Authority and the Bible* 247). The concern is justifiable, but internal examination of 1 Timothy points us toward gnosticism and makes the connection between the two less "tenuous" than Liefeld seems to consider it. See Rudolph, *Gnosis* 302-303.

¹¹ See Kroeger, "1 Timothy 2:12" 235, 238; Rudolph, *Gnosis* 97-99.

¹² See e.g. D. Moo, "1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance," *Trinity Journal* 1 (1980) 68-71; J. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 207-216; G. Knight, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 31-32.

¹³ See R. Kroeger and C. Kroeger, "May Women Teach? Heresy in the Pastoral Epistles," *Reformed Journal* 30 (October 1980) 17; M. Roberts, "Woman Shall Be Saved: A Closer Look at 1 Timothy 2:15," *Reformed Journal* 33 (April 1983) 20.

In this case 1 Tim 2:13-14 makes very good sense as a coherent counter-argument to a specific problem—namely, a false interpretation of Genesis by heretical women. Paul refutes the gnostic arguments by reasserting that Adam was created first and that he was created perfect, not ignorant. We could summarize the intent of vv. 13-14 as follows: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve—he did not have to wait for Eve to come along and give him life. And Adam was not originally deceived and needing her enlightenment [i.e., by her feeding him the forbidden fruit of knowledge], but rather the woman was grossly deceived [the intensifying prefix *ex* in *exapat̄theisa* emphasizing that Eve’s eating was sinful, not honorable as the gnostics suggested] and fell into transgression [having previously been the sinless creation of Almighty God, not the imperfect product of a lower god who, in gnostic mythology, was responsible for creating this world].”

Traditionalists have preferred to read vv. 13-14 as two separate arguments for women’s permanent subordination: woman was not only (1) formed later but was also (2) first to sin.¹⁴ But this interpretation fails on both exegetical and philosophical grounds. First, the traditional interpretation stumbles over the phrase “Adam was not deceived.” Everyone familiar with the original version of the story knew that Adam came out of the garden as guilty as Eve. Paul himself, in fact, spoke of the fall as Adam’s deed, not as Eve’s (see Romans 5). So Paul could hardly argue for any form of male superiority by referring to Genesis 3.¹⁵ Second, the traditional view puts in Paul’s mouth the dubious assumptions that (1) Adam’s primacy in creation should have anything to do with current male-female relationships and (2) Eve’s primacy in sin either caused all women to become more error-prone than men or symbolized a female inferiority that already existed. On the contrary, Paul frequently asserts that all persons sin but never suggests that women do it better or more often than men.

These inadequacies in the traditional view of 1 Tim 2:13-14 should have been apparent all along, but the plausibility of this alternative explanation—placing the passage in a gnostic or proto-gnostic context—puts the previous view’s weaknesses in greater relief.

So far I have been largely expanding and corroborating Kroeger’s interpretation. There remain three additional exegetical difficulties. All three, however, offer resolutions that may support further the plausibility of this approach.

First, defenders of the traditional view have argued that Paul’s blanket statement, “I do not permit a woman to teach,” sounds universal. If what he really meant was “I do not permit a woman to teach error,” and that he would have no objection to women teaching once they got their doctrine straight, why did he not say that? Kroeger received criticism even from a fellow egalitarian for failing to deal with this point.¹⁶ And egalitarians are

¹⁴ See e.g. Hurley, *Man and Woman* 202; Knight, *New Testament Teaching* 65-66.

¹⁵ Hurley, *Man and Woman* 215-216, recognizes this problem and attempts to escape it with an unlikely interpretive leap, reading “Adam was not deceived” as meaning that God had already prepared the man, but not the woman, to discern the Devil’s lies and thereby be capable of fulfilling religious leadership roles.

¹⁶ Liefeld, “Response to Kroeger” 245.

in no position to interpret Paul's dictum as a temporary prohibition, needed until women could surmount cultural obstacles to education—not when, out of the other side of their mouths, these egalitarians are championing women (one of whom, Priscilla, labored in Ephesus) who did fulfill a teaching or leadership role in the NT.¹⁷ Not all women of Paul's day were intellectually impoverished or hopelessly contaminated by pagan practices, yet Paul seems to prohibit all women from teaching in Ephesus. The egalitarians seem forced into the implausible claim that no woman in the Ephesian church was sufficiently orthodox and educated to teach.

But the gnostic solution presented here solves this problem by showing the extent of Paul's predicament. It is not simply that some women are teaching error. Rather, the placing of any woman, whether qualified or not, in authority may be undesirably reinforcing pagan cultural baggage. The proto-gnostics may have been associating female leadership in their own congregation with the perpetual female dominance that their distortion of the Eve and Adam story embodied for them. To quash this error and its obvious threat to Timothy's authority as appointed overseer of the Ephesus congregation, Paul excludes all women from leadership. The limitations thus placed temporarily on genuinely gifted women are less harmful to the congregation than the confusion fostered by the existence of women leaders in this gnostic context would be. (One can see definite application to our own day, in which all too many women have brought the angry, divisive cultural baggage of radical feminism into their justifiable quest for a share of Church leadership. Perhaps, ironically, periods of feminist ideology are the times in which the Church does need to consider temporary limitations on women in leadership.)

I turn now to the second problem awaiting resolution, that of v. 15: "But women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety." While some feel that feminists have unnecessarily clouded the clear meaning of vv. 11–14, v. 15 is universally acknowledged as difficult and obscure. The concept of a woman being saved through childbearing has baffled traditional and nontraditional commentators alike and has brought forth a number of unsatisfactory hypotheses. Kroeger has offered two unlikely proposals: that women would gain socioeconomic salvation through having a family, or that they would not suffer from giving birth to the illegitimate children they conceived through the sexual immorality Kroeger associates with *authentain* in v. 12.¹⁸ Douglas Moo tries to expand the sense of *teknogonias* to include child-rearing as well as childbearing and says that Paul is using the word as a synecdoche to

¹⁷ Despite the apparent inconsistency (or, at the very least, infelicitous coexistence) with their insistence that women did exercise leadership in the NT, many egalitarians do explain 1 Timothy 2 by saying that women in that cultural situation needed to learn first. See e.g. Roberts, "Woman Shall Be Saved" 20; G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 179–180, 259–260.

¹⁸ C. Kroeger, "Ancient Heresies and a Strange Greek Verb," *Reformed Journal* 29 (March 1979) 15.

represent the general scope of women's activities.¹⁹ Not only is this idea unduly imaginative, however; it also implies that women must meet particular, works-oriented conditions in order to gain salvation. Others have referred *teknogonias* to The Childbearing—that is, the birth of the Messiah who restores both men and women to righteousness before God.²⁰ This is possible—but, as the common-sense commentator Donald Guthrie avers, “if that were the writer's intention he could hardly have chosen a more obscure or ambiguous way or saying it.”²¹

The gnostic context in which I have placed this passage further supports what I would consider a strong exegetical argument that Paul is referring to the protection of women in childbirth. The verb *sōzō* can have a variety of meanings, including physical healing or protection as well as spiritual salvation. It is used here in the future tense, whereas spiritual salvation has been described as already operative in believers (1:13, 16) and available to all who would appropriate the benefits of Christ's already completed act (1:15; 2:4–6). Further, *dia* here takes the genitive, not the accusative, suggesting that women will be kept safe “through” an experience still to come rather than “because of” a completed act.²² But beyond this, Paul has just spoken of Eve's fall and thus would naturally want to assure women that God will be with them through the painful childbirths that have ensued since Eve's curse. The need for such assurance is even greater if he is specifically calling on deviant women to abandon their more optimistic interpretation of the fall and return to the orthodoxy of Genesis. The stark realities of Eve's curse would unquestionably motivate women to prefer the gnostic interpretation to Paul at this point, so Paul sensitively includes a promise of God's protection as part of his appeal—a carrot with the stick of vv. 13–14.²³

To conclude my exegesis I must back up to vv. 8–10 and make two brief points. First, the command that women should display visible deeds as an outgrowth of their faith fits well with the tendencies in some gnostic groups to downplay ethical requirements since, according to gnostic philosophy, salvation comes through knowledge and the body is irrelevant. The women giving Paul and Timothy trouble in Ephesus are “professing godliness” (*epangellomenais theosebeian*). Paul later uses the same verb to

¹⁹ Moo, “1 Timothy 2:11–15” 72. D. Guthrie, in *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 78, notes that Chrysostom gave the same explanation.

²⁰ Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* 183; P. Payne, “Libertarian Women in Ephesus: A Response to Douglas J. Moo's Article, ‘1 Timothy 2:11–15: Meaning and Significance,’” *Trinity Journal* 2 (1981) 177.

²¹ Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles* 78.

²² A. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985) 92, makes this grammatical point.

²³ I have been surprised to find some interpreters citing the fact that some women have died in childbirth as a compelling argument against the view I am presenting here. See e.g. S. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 128. If we dropped from the NT every promise that, for reasons not fully understood, did not appear to be empirically validated on every occasion, we would not have much left to stand on.

describe those who profess knowledge but do not have it (6:20). Paul's insistence that these women should back up their professions with ethical behavior is particularly appropriate for gnostic types who think knowledge is sufficient.

Second, an answer to a likely objection. Verse 8 reads: "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing." Does this not imply that the strictures on women should also apply everywhere—that is, to all Christians? Not necessarily. Gordon Fee, for example, has suggested that "everywhere" (*en panti topō*, literally "in every place") may be a reference to the multiple house-church settings in which early Christians assembled.²⁴ The fact that house-church meetings would be a likely occasion where Christian men might engage publicly in "anger or disputing" when they should be praying together in holiness and unity adds plausibility to Fee's suggestion. We can make good sense of "in every place," then, without extending its force to every Christian congregation, or even beyond the city limits of Ephesus.

It is time to summarize our reconstruction of the whole passage. The gospel is struggling in Ephesus with gnostic-influenced women trumpeting a feminist reinterpretation of Adam and Eve as precedent for their own spiritual primacy and authority. Puffed up by this interpretation, the women are ignoring both Timothy's authority as teacher and their own ethical responsibilities. In response Paul reasserts the Genesis version of the fall, draws attention to the inseparability of ethical behavior from true Christian spirituality, and urges Timothy to place women in subjection until the feminist threat to true doctrine has subsided. To reassure recalcitrant women Paul promises that Eve's curse, though still valid, will not be as painful as they might fear.

Although my reconstruction of this passage is convincing to me, I do not expect that it will convince everyone. In fact, the authors of the Danvers Statement may simply find that I have enlarged the collection of "hermeneutical oddities" they must refute. Out of respect for these and others who support the traditional view, and out of concern for the peace and unity of evangelical Christianity, I wish to submit the following.

We usually presume that, on the question of women in church leadership, one can take two positions: yes or no. But the illustrations with which I began this essay imply that actually there exist four positions, distinguishable by level of tolerance as well as by pro-or-con stance. We can place these positions on a continuum from A to D, the following description of which may serve as a mnemonic aid:

Those at position A reject women in leadership and are *angry* that anyone is suggesting otherwise.

Those at position B reject women in leadership *but* recognize that others may reasonably differ.

Those at position C, while believing that women *can* lead, recognize the diversity of opinion and do not make acceptance of women in leadership a test of fellowship or an absolute necessity.

²⁴ Fee, "Reflections" 145.

Those at position D believe that women should lead and *dogmatically* enforce their viewpoint by installing women at every level of leadership.

Looking back at our initial illustrations, we see that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has staked out position D. The Danvers Statement, meanwhile, seems to waver between A and B, mixing acceptance of evangelicals who hold alternative viewpoints with harsh language regarding the likely consequences of those views. Probably the members of the CBMW reflect a similar variance, with some of them (the Bs) readily fellowshiping with egalitarian Cs while other Danvers signers (the As) genuinely believe that evangelical feminism is an oxymoron that will lead directly to the rejection of Biblical authority.

For both theological and sociological causes, I stand at position C rather than D and, in fact, feel much more comfortable with Bs than with Ds. Theologically, I have a difficult time imagining that Paul would make women's ordination a test of fellowship were he to arrive on the contemporary scene. When basic understanding of the means of salvation (as in the circumcision debate with the Galatians) or basic ethical points (like the Corinthian ignorance of sexual morality) were at stake, Paul spoke unequivocally and threatened excommunication. But in matters of individual conscience or social preference, like abstinence from idol food or observance of holy days, he retained a latitude of tolerance. Given that modern American Protestants freely choose from a wide variety of options the ecclesiastical polity to which they wish to submit, and considering the lack of connection between women's ministries and any central principle of salvation, I would expect Paul to apply his tolerant perspective to this question.

This brings me to my sociological point. For Protestants at least, given this denominational diversity, the issue of women's ordination is not like the evils of slavery or abortion, in which innocent victims have no recourse. Catholics desiring women priests may say they have no viable alternative to their mother Church. But Protestants can easily move, if they wish, to a denomination whose view on women's ministerial roles matches their own. Often such a move would require relatively minimal adjustment of other theological opinions. For example, the Presbyterian Church in America staunchly opposes women's ordination, while the evangelical wing of the Presbyterian Church (USA) strongly supports it. Some denominations remain broad enough to accommodate both views. Persons tending toward position A or D on my continuum may say that they do not wish to change denominations, but their inconvenience does not justify the extermination of differing opinions.

In a world of imperfect consensus, the situation currently prevailing in evangelicalism may be ideal: Both traditionalists and egalitarians have plenty of outlets in which to live out their belief on women in church leadership. Would a truce marked by continuing dialogue and the absence of inflammatory rhetoric—on both sides—be too much to ask?