



## Mapping Future Frontiers for Women in Ecclesial Leadership: A Fresh Appraisal of 1 Timothy 2:11-15

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*Roundtable: Biblical Perspectives*

### Abstract

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The passage at the center of the contemporary debate regarding women in ministry is 1 Timothy 2:11–15. Many female seminarians pursuing their call to the pastorate face opposition from professors, peers, and church members. A fresh appraisal of this text suggests that exegetical integrity is not at odds with sparing the female pastor her emotional distress. This paper builds on scholarly readings of the passage that challenge the traditional assumption banning women from governing pastoral church offices, underscoring the promise of a middle-ground approach for advancing the gender roles discussion. The argument begins by examining the historical context of the evangelical gender debate and proceeds with an illumination of the passage’s background and a verse-by-verse analysis. It closes with constructive suggestions in light of pertinent leadership models.

### Keywords:

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Whether specific ecclesial leadership offices are closed to women has spurred much debate in recent decades, hinging on fundamental beliefs about God’s design for church government and our approach to relevant scripture. The passage typically at the center of the discussion is 1 Timothy 2:11–15. In most seminary and leadership programs today, one will find women who have joined the school to further their call to serve as pastors in the local church. It reasons that the professor who has adopted the traditional view that forbids women to the pastorate faces an uphill battle. Thomas Schreiner (1995) observed the emotional agony of females whose authentic calling is constantly undermined, noting, “most of these women students have already been subjected somewhere in their journey to insensitive and cruel comments by men” (pp. 105–154).

A fresh appraisal of the passage in 1 Timothy implies that exegetical integrity need not be sacrificed on the altar of assuaging the aspiring female’s emotional distress. This paper explores unique contributions to the conversation over the extent and nature of women’s leadership in the church, maintaining the viability of scholarly perspectives

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2023 Regent Research Roundtables Proceedings pp. 1-13.

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ISSN 2993-589X

that challenge traditional assumptions. A middle-ground approach between complementarianism and egalitarianism holds promise for advancing the evangelical gender discussion (Kohm et al., 2011; Sumner, 2007).

The current essay first lays out the historical background of the contemporary evangelical debate. The discussion has commonly been defined as a conversation between two parties. On the one hand, *egalitarians* maintain that all functions of church government are open to men and women alike. On the other hand, *complementarians* emphasize that men and women are created for distinct functions that entail limitations for women regarding the office of pastor or elder. In fact, a closer look reveals that at the furthest extreme on each side is *secular feminism* (dictated by an individual rights and autonomy agenda) on the one hand and *cultural patriarchy* (exclusively denying a woman's fitness for leadership roles in either the family, church, or society) on the other. The second section illuminates the historical and literary background of 1 Timothy 2. The third part supplies a close exegetical analysis of verses 11-15, acknowledging the contextually-laden meaning of Paul's instruction without abstracting the passage from application to broader ecclesial contexts. Based on the analysis and significant leadership approaches, I conclude with constructive suggestions for the evangelical gender conversation moving forward.

### **Expanding Roles for American Women and the Evangelical Gender Debate**

The history of the United States has witnessed a remarkable expansion of women's roles in the home, church, and society. Embodying the heart of female ministry in America, women organized as part of the women's missionary enterprise in the early 19th century. They formed small societies to advance fundraising initiatives and eventually formed their own mission boards to evangelize women and children. In 1888, women in North America joined with others in Britain to spearhead the international ecumenical group, the World's Missionary Committee of Christian Women (Reeves-Ellington, 2011).

The post-Civil War era saw the expansion of female opportunities in legal, business, education, and professional arenas, realizing the vision of first-generation American suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Suzan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone. Females entered the civic sphere, seizing forums as public speakers. Society began to recognize women as contributors of unique skills that men lacked. Prominent evangelical leaders like Dwight L. Moody and A. J. Gordon repeatedly called women to step in as preachers. Gordon's wife, Maria, taught at the college he founded while serving as president of the Massachusetts Women's Christian Temperance Union (Epstein, 1986; Hassey, 1986). During World War I, the droves of women who stepped in to fill industrial work vacancies left by male servicemen broke down the remaining

opposition to women's suffrage. Such events culminated in the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment (Free, 2015; McConnaughy, 2013).

The early 20th-century Pentecostal revivals embodied society's larger empowering of women. The Pentecostal emphasis on collective spiritual gifts for every congregant afforded abundant opportunities for female evangelists. Not only did Pentecostalism usually welcome women more than the mainline churches, but it also earned a reputation for its female preachers and leaders. Among the reverberating voices of the Azusa Street revival were the African American pioneers Julia Hutchins, Neely Terry, and Lucy Farrow. Later Pentecostal visionaries included the radio evangelist and Foursquare Church founder Aimee Semple McPherson, the televangelist Kathryn Kuhlman, and church-planting preacher Maria Woodworth-Etter. In the 1960s, the Charismatic movement extended the rising trend of women preachers and pastors, embodying a new wave of Pentecostalism now in the mainline churches. In Pentecostal-Charismatic contexts, it is increasingly more widespread to encounter women televangelists, all-women conference lineups, and their teachings in books and DVDs (Alexander, 2005; Hosier, 1976; Rademaker, 2018).

After World War II, as American families turned inward for stability, the structure of households shifted from large extended families to more controllable nuclear families. For many, the domestic containment of the Cold War years and the ensuing *baby boom* demanded retracting to conventional mores. Families found solidity in the idealistic roles of the homemaking wife and breadwinning husband. Evangelical women viewed the domestic life and nurturing children as the center of their work and ministry. During the 1960s, the social unrest of the Civil Rights Movement called attention to the persistent prejudice against marginalized groups like women, triggering a wave of feminism. Fresh awareness for wider issues such as sexuality, domesticity, and reproductive rights caused evangelical women to reevaluate their traditional roles (Cochran, 2005; Coontz, 2010; Graebner, 1991; Swinth, 2018). The new feminist movement focused on individual rights and benefits over corporate solidarity and drew a noted dichotomy between *family life* (the home) and the *world* (the workplace and public life). In the 1970s and 1980s, the evangelical feminist movement solidified in response to secular feminism while defending a woman's equal opportunity in the church and decision-making power in the home (Hull, 1987; Lee-Barnewall, 2016; Whitehead & Blankenhorn, 1991).

Among the emerging organizations that promoted the evangelical feminist cause was the Evangelical Women's Caucus. Pioneered by Nancy Hardesty in 1974, the caucus strove to enhance female admittance to the ministry, seminaries, and church administration. In 1986, Catherine Kroeger established the Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) to build families in harmony with scripture's authority in matters of faith and practice. CBE adherents would eventually veer from the *feminist* label because

of its association with secular feminism, adopting instead the descriptor *egalitarianism* (i.e., that all roles in the home and church are open to men and women alike). This move distanced the CBE from the Evangelical Woman's Caucus, which tolerated some of the more liberal views of secular feminism. The latter substituted the *evangelical* signifier from their name, known today as the Ecumenical Women's Caucus, becoming the flagship organization of *Christian feminism* (Evangelical & Ecumenical, 2004; Finger & Horner, 2006).

In 1987, in retort to the apparent challenges of feminism, representatives from the traditional perspective formed the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). The council offered a distinct alternative to Christian feminism, adopting the position known as *complementarianism* (although men and women are created equally in God's image, they are made for distinct roles in the home and church). Regrettably, the CBMW's reproval did little to discriminate between *Christian* (the Women's Caucus) and more conservative *evangelical* (the CBE) feminists, leading to a riposte from egalitarians (Piper & Grudem, 1992; see also Piper & Grudem, 1991).

Complementarians and egalitarians represented by the CBMW and CBE, respectively, came to comprise the main players in the often adversative evangelical gender debate. However, as the controversy's historical contours indicate, the parties on the feminist (secular and Christian) and patriarchalist extremes warrant the most significant danger to the biblical model of gender roles. The more recent *Christian patriarchy* movement, although claiming a biblically grounded perspective, in practice follows an unmitigated male authority across the spheres of home, church, and society. Often associated with excess and scandal, Christian patriarchalists represent a more significant rival to biblical egalitarianism than complementarianism (Wilson, 2016; see also Joyce, 2010).

It remains unfortunate to see some historically evangelical denominations fracturing over the gender roles issue. This past year, the Southern Baptist Convention decided to expunge five churches that had installed a female pastor. These churches, which included Saddleback Valley Community Church, one of its largest (at about 55,000 members), were deemed "to be not in friendly cooperation" with the convention (Graham, 2023). Although not as the *lead* pastor, Saddleback had installed a woman as a *campus* pastor.

## Background of 1 Timothy 2

A robust reexamination of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 in view of its first-century historical context offers needed perspective for the evangelical gender debate, illuminating the respective arguments and clarifying misconceptions. The Christian community Paul advised in 1 Timothy faced peculiar circumstances, unlike any other church to which he wrote.

The epistle was written to Paul's confidant and ministry overseer in Ephesus, Timothy, during the mid-60s, with Nero's reign and the mass slaughter of Christians under way. One of the most prodigious metropolises of the eastern Mediterranean, Ephesus was an integral trade center and seedbed of multiculturalism. Two religious influences on first-century Ephesus are crucial to comprehending the historical context of the letter. The first is the false teaching of the Judaizers. Paul's correspondence with Timothy reveals evidence of a Jewish sect that wove tenets of Christianity with a works righteousness ethic and preyed on vulnerable women (1 Tim. 5:11-13; 2 Tim. 3:5-8). Although the Judaizers probably considered themselves Christians, their emphasis on Jewish monotheism undervalued the meaning of the crucified Christ. As gleaned from Paul elsewhere, the sect was culpable of pressuring Gentiles into accepting the many obligations of the law, especially circumcision (Gal. 2:11-21). The second notable impulse was the worship of the goddess Artemis. Ephesus was home to the goddess' central temple, the Artemision, hailed by Antipater as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Artemis was revered as the deity of nature, fertility, and young women. Her cult was run by an all-woman priesthood that kept male worshippers in check (Immendörfer, 2017; Wright, 2004).

Paul began 1 Timothy 2 by urging that the people pray for everyone (vv. 1-7). Such prayer, for believers and unbelievers alike (including "kings" and others in "high positions," New Revised Standard Version), promoted the virtue of "a quiet and peaceable life." Paul proceeded to a few gender-specific guidelines. Some Ephesian men were prone to dissension and quarreling during public prayer. In verse 8, he implored them to turn from hypocrisy and pray with sincerity (Huizing, 2011; Lea & Griffin, 1992; Oden, 1989). He then turned to the Ephesian women, advising them on appropriate congregational décor according to the principle of "modesty" (v. 9), from the Greek *kosmios* suggesting respectability and orderliness (Thayer, 2007). The kind of dress Paul cautioned against probably encompassed both sensually revealing clothes and attire that summoned attention to one's social status (as insinuated in the allusion to extravagant "gold" and "pearl" jewelry and "expensive" garb). His comments in Chapter 2 were directed to the corporate context, apparent in the emphasis on praying together (v. 8) and the relational aspects of teaching in the subsequent section (vv. 12-13). Nevertheless, the general principles behind his admonishments extend to female conduct in a broader sense, as hinted at in the transition to "good works" in verse 10—a thread in Paul's teaching usually applicable to all believers across many contexts (Fee, 1988; Hoag, 2015; Lea & Griffin, 1992).

### Exegetical Analysis of Verses 11-15

Paul's ensuing restriction of female speech appears quite coarse on a cursory reading:

11) Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. 12) I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. 13) For Adam was formed first, then Eve, 14) and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

The insistence on a prayerful attitude of *hēsychia* (“silence” or “quietness”) frames the entire pericope in Chapter 2. The same term appears in verse 2: “that we may lead a quiet [*hēsychios*] and peaceable life.” If Paul seemed abrupt, consider that while his contemporary males disparaged a female from speaking and learning in public, he urged her pursuit of understanding and knowledge. The single verb in the passage appearing in the imperative is *manthanō* (“learn”), underscoring Paul’s focus on promoting her freedom to learn. His instruction on teaching and authority is preceded by *epitrepō* (“I do not permit”), a present indicative form that lacks the same sense of permanence as the summons to learn (Lea & Griffin, 1992; Liefeld, 1999).

Despite the challenges the passage presents, it is not necessary to ascribe it, as some argue, to some Deutero-Pauline source. The reason we do not see similar claims about a woman’s learning and submission to authority elsewhere in Paul is tied to the peculiar circumstances of Ephesus. He is countering the influence of false teachers who preyed on susceptible Ephesian women (1 Tim. 5:11-13; 2 Tim. 3:6-8). While the primary heretics were males – for instance, Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Philetus (1 Tim. 1:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18) – vulnerable women were circulating the false teaching during corporate worship. Moreover, considering the ubiquity of the Artemis cult, it is likely at least a few of Timothy’s female congregants were former cultists. If traces of the cultists’ former ways lingered – their raucous exuberance and overt privileging of the female voice over that of males – they would have further compromised the atmosphere of learning Paul encouraged. The Artemis cult background, characterized by sumptuous décor and promiscuity, likewise helps fill in the context for the modesty admonishment in verses 9-10 (Gritz, 1991; Lea & Griffin, 1992; Liefeld, 1999). Although concerned with how women were instructing men during corporate worship, clues elsewhere suggest Paul did not regard it inherently wrong for women to teach men. He commended Timothy for being taught correctly by his godly mother and grandmother. In Acts 18:24-26, Luke acknowledged the formative influence of Priscilla on the learned Apollos when she educated him in matters of faith (Lea & Griffin, 1992; Piper & Grudem, 1991).

Paul’s use of the verb *authentēō* (“to have authority over”) in verse 12 is noteworthy. The term’s close correlation to “to teach” (*didaskō*) suggests that the two words should be paired. Paul is not restricting “teaching” on the one hand and “authority” on the other but, more likely, “teaching authoritatively” (or “authoritative teaching”; Moo, 1991; Payne, 2009). It may be that Paul is not merely addressing women who exercise the authority of the teaching office but those doing so in an unhealthy, “domineering” (or

“usurping”) manner (Lea & Griffin, 1992; Liefeld, 1999; Marshall, 2007; Towner, 1994). However, more significant than whether the term carries a positive or negative undertone, is its uniqueness. This instance is the only place in the New Testament where *authenteō* appears. It is not the typical *exousia* Paul used liberally to express a person or ruler’s authority.<sup>1</sup> The unusual word implies, as Towner (1994) suggested, “an unusual situation” (p. 77). Considering Ephesus’ peculiar circumstances, the inappropriate teaching Paul warned against stems from its heretical content and the disturbance it caused amid a social order where instructing men was unusual and offensive. To be educated or corrected by a wife, considering the age and education gap (men were frequently 9 or 10 years older than their wives), would have been unsettling for the typical husband. Upon marriage, the much older and learned husband effectively acquired the role of the wife’s teacher – prior to that, her mother carried out this function (Wolicki, 2015). Even with this context in view, it is unlikely Paul limited all public female teaching where men are present but probably only that belonging to the office of overseer (or elder) described in the immediately following text (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

It remains to be shown whether a woman’s (*gynē*) learning with “submission” (from *hypotassō*) is directed toward her husband, as is usually assumed. The anarthrous, singular form of *gynē* functions as a generic noun, likely referring to more than just “wives” and encompassing even the younger widows Paul reproved in 5:11-15 (Lea & Griffin, 1992; Mounce, 2000). Additionally, *hypotassō* does not appear here in the typical middle voice but as a dative construct that more likely refers to a woman’s attitude as a learner, namely, her submission to God (and the teachings of God). Although the one benefiting from such submission might include her husband, the elders, or other church leaders, Paul altered the focus (Gritz, 1991; Wright, 2004). His solution did not entail a woman’s verbal silence. His word choice for “silence,” *hēsychia*, encompassed chiefly an attitude or disposition (even virtue) of “quietness” or “tranquility.” The term implies composure, responsiveness, and a teachable spirit befitting learning, as Paul commended for both men and women in verse 2 (Bauer et al., 2000; see also Mounce, 2000; Oden, 1989).

Much has been said about the creation narrative allusions in the subsequent verses. To comprehend the allusion in verse 13 to the order of creation (as portrayed in Gen. 2:7-8, 18-23), one must consider the similar argument presented in 1 Corinthians 11:7-9. In the latter, Paul referred to the order of creation principle to add perspective to his insistence that women cover their heads and then immediately reinterprets it in light of mutual interdependence. The conventional male-first order is counterbalanced by the

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<sup>1</sup> As in a person’s authority (1 Cor. 11:10; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10), a bearer of ruling authority (Rom. 13:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; Tit. 3:1), the right to choose or act (1 Cor. 8:9; 9:4-6, 12, 18; 2 Thess. 3:9), or the domain of power (Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:2).

acknowledgment in verses 11–12 that now men come from women through childbirth. Most agree that Paul’s words refer to a culturally specific practice and would be applied differently today. Because order of creation theology abounded among the Jewish rabbis, evident in marriage structure and primogeniture laws, the allusion may serve to correct some false teachers’ distorted view of the narrative. The Judaizer’s “myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim. 1:4; cf. Titus 3:9), which some of the women had capitulated to, included false impressions about creation and the Fall. Perhaps Paul is suggesting that although the man was created first, the woman was deceived first, thus, they are equally responsible (Liefeld, 1999; Marshall, 2007; Towner, 1994).<sup>2</sup> Verse 14’s mention of Eve’s deception also supplied an example for the Ephesian situation. As Eve’s duplicity had calamitous results (Gen. 3:1–13, 16), the deception of women in Ephesus jeopardized the equability of corporate worship. Paul did not say that women are more prone than men to deception, which would imply an ontological subordination (both egalitarians and complementarians agree here). It had become common custom to allude to Eve’s deception when warning against false teaching, a rhetorical argument Paul likewise employed in 2 Corinthians 11:3, although in the latter as an example for men and women alike (Fee, 1988; Towner, 1994).

Concerning verse 15, it appears that some Ephesian women were neglecting their responsibility to rear their children (1 Tim. 5:13–14). The instruction cautions them against the excessive demands of leadership as an overseer, assuming the obligations of an elder would have only further impaired the negligent woman’s ability to fulfill her family duties. Paul’s directive about “childbearing” (*teknogonia*) probably applies to the whole God-given vocation of motherhood. By fulfilling this calling, a woman embodied the virtue of the faithful (Fee, 1998; Mounce, 1993; Towner, 1994).

### Conclusions and Implications for Leadership Theory

Historical-cultural background is indispensable for navigating the exegetical nuances of disputed Pauline gender passages. First-century Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures were significantly more male-dominant than most Western peoples today (North American, European, and Latin American), where gender parity has become the standard. For Ephesus, unruly female teaching, informed by the background of the Judaizing controversy and the boisterousness of the goddess cult, would have been perceived as unsettling, if not hostile. Contemporary women are as well-educated as men and hold similar careers. Households are not as large, technology has revolutionized domestic life, and the average life expectancy is much longer. Such factors equate to more time for women to pursue an education and a career (Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Patterson et al., 2008). Interpretive approaches that overlook the

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 5 places the culpability for the introduction of sin into the world squarely on Adam.



culturally conditioned nature of Paul's instruction are potentially destructive, as evident in the Christian patriarchy movement.

In connection to ministry (and marriage), servant leadership affords an innovative paradigm that helps navigate interpretations on the far extremes. Among other approaches, such as transformational theory (see Druskat, 1994), the servant leadership model warrants consideration for its potential contribution to the gender roles discussion. According to this model's architect, Robert Greenleaf, the servant leader begins by leading and, from there, will *aspire to lead* (as cited in Lee-Barnewall, 2016; see also Crippen, 2022). A servant-first approach taps into Jesus' pattern, who "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28).

Paul extended the same principle to the husband's self-sacrificial love in marriage, built on the example of Christ who "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). For Paul, the measure of marital virtue is submission to one another, rooted in the image of the surrendering love of Christ for the church (Eph. 5:21). Dierendonck and Patterson underscored the close tie between servant leadership (as compassionate love) with other virtues such as wisdom, humility, gratitude, forgiveness, and altruism (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). A servant-first paradigm reverses the patriarchal model where leadership is lorded over women. Recovering a robust servant-minded approach helps guard against a patriarchal reading of 1 Timothy 2 fixated on submission to male authority to the neglect of Paul's more salient claim encouraging women to learn. Such a lens might also push beyond feminist readings that cast Paul as a misogynist while ignoring that he defended a woman's right to learn in a society that denied it.

While 1 Timothy 2:11–15 contains timeless application regarding the value of parental responsibility and the orderliness of corporate worship, this passage alone hardly prohibits all women from governing (overseer) pastoral positions. Paul's affirmation of female leaders elsewhere – Chloe, Phoebe, Junia, and Nympha, among others (Rom. 16:1 Cor. 11) – bears witness to their considerable, even governing, ministry among early church congregations. Undergirding the corrective (mediating position) this study has proposed for the evangelical gender divide is the need for *discretion*: the pastorate (and ordination) is not off limits to some solely because of their gender, but a given church (like Ephesus) may exercise judgment in restricting women from overseer positions. Considering social, ethnic, and regional factors, a church may deem it best to limit some women from specific positions. Nevertheless, similar constraints may also be extended to irresponsible men.

Local churches and denominations stand to benefit from adopting a perspective that reaches toward the center of the gender roles divide. Kohm et al. (2011) underscored the promise of a middle ground for contemporary biblical scholarship that challenges

demeaning attitudes toward women. Such a compromise does not necessarily imply divorcing oneself from one's complementarian or egalitarian roots, but it might mean adopting a more moderate complementarianism or, for others, a cautious egalitarianism. The extremes – patriarchy and an unbridled feminism – threaten to erode the fabric of a biblically conversant, servant-oriented approach to leadership.

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