

## Women in Leadership

The question of what roles women can properly assume in the church is certainly a thorny one—I continue to wrestle with it on almost a daily basis. As I have studied I Tim 2:11-15 in particular, I find that I have more and more questions, and am less certain of where I stand on the issue.

Fee's discussion of hermeneutical questions with respect to the Epistles is certainly relevant. In my mind, the primary issue concerning I Tim 2:11-15 has to do with Fee's basic rule (p. 64). If a text can never be interpreted apart from what Paul and his hearers would have understood it to mean, then we must ask and answer the following: Did Paul understand his prohibition against women teaching or having authority over men (vv. 11-12) as a universal injunction, and would his hearers have understood it that way?

Here Fee's problem of cultural relativity comes into play (pp. 70-76). He states that cultural relativity is an inevitable corollary to the occasional nature of the Epistles (p. 71). Certainly this is true of the situation which Paul addressed in his letter to Timothy. The Ephesians were experiencing difficulty with false doctrine, and it had affected everyone in the congregation. The heterodoxy had inspired strife, even in the midst of a public worship setting (I Tim 6:3-5a; 2:8). And the false teachers were influencing and preying upon some of the women in the congregation (I Tim 5:13; II Tim 3:6). While an outbreak of false teaching in an individual church is universally *possible*, it

was the unique experience of it at Ephesus which Paul sought to address. Thus at least *some* of what he had to say in the instance of I Tim 2:11-15 is grounded in the local situation; the logic of I Tim 2 as a whole relates it to Paul's overarching concern (false doctrine) and purpose for writing (see I Tim 1:3, 18-20). Fee makes this very point on p. 75, and concludes on this basis that Paul's prohibition in I Tim 2:11-12 is *completely* grounded in the cultural situation of the Ephesian church, and therefore inapplicable in a universal sense to a modern church setting.

At this point, I am unprepared to go as far as Fee. While Paul's prohibition is undeniably related to a specific situation at Ephesus, the logic behind his prohibition (vv. 13-14) is based on *objective*—not relative—grounds (the creation order of Adam and Eve and the historical details of the Fall of Man). The underlying rationale of Paul's prohibition does not hinge upon the setting at Ephesus. Therefore (it seems to me), the principle which leads Paul to make his prohibition transcends the immediate Ephesian context.<sup>1</sup> On this basis, we might reasonably conclude that Paul understood vv. 11-12 to be objective and universal in scope as well.

While I am still largely unpersuaded by the egalitarian position on I Tim 2:11-15, I am far more tentative and introspective concerning my own assertions about the passage. I still feel that the objective basis of Paul's prohibition in vv. 11-12 lends it force which goes beyond the local setting; thus I continue to have difficulty with female eldership

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<sup>1</sup> This position does have difficult implications. I am uncomfortable with the notion, based on v. 12, that women are somehow more susceptible to deception than men by virtue of Eve's sin. Given that portions of the existing leadership of the Ephesian church (male elders, see Ac 20:28-31) were the primary peddlers of false teaching, such a stance hardly seems credible.

within the church from both a doctrinal and practical standpoint. Nevertheless, I heartily agree with Fee that, on these difficult points, “[one] must exercise Christian charity . . . [and] have love for . . . those with whom they differ” (p. 74).