

1 Timothy 2:12 — A Dialog with the Debate

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Author's Concern & Purpose

I must confess that I am drawn to controversy. Given the no man's land of animus and vitriol which often divides people who are entrenched on opposing sides of an issue, I realize that some may find my preoccupation with controversy to be unhealthy. In response, I suggest that a valuable pursuit resides beneath the noise and passion of debate and disagreement: the search for truth. Therein lies controversy's allure for me.

If my characterization of controversy is accurate, there is no shortage of truth seekers in the Church. From the hour of their new birth, Christians at once have a virtual ocean of controversies to wade through: Can a Christian lose his or her salvation? Is it possible for a Christian to be demon-possessed? Will the rapture occur before or after the Great Tribulation? Is tithing a valid practice for New Testament saints, or is it applicable only to the Old Testament? The list goes on.

For my own part, I rarely have qualms about choosing sides in a debate; but since beginning my seminary education, I have found myself reconsidering my position on a number of controversial topics that I would not have budged on in times past. Training for the pastorate has made me realize anew that my convictions have practical import on a *vocational* level. How I shepherd God's people is greatly influenced by where I stand on any number of issues which are contested in the church today. Given the weight and responsibility of church leadership, it is incumbent upon me to avoid error by resisting the temptation to be overly dismissive or opinionated with regard to the views of other Christians who may disagree with me. I am merely one member in the Body of Christ, and I must humbly recognize that I, like every other believer, know only in part (1 Cor. 13:9).

The Church's disagreement concerning women in ministry is one of the controversies I have found myself revisiting. Until recently, I have been decidedly against women occupying offices (such as pastors, elders, etc.) within the Church; my position has been largely based upon a cursory reading of Scriptures such as 1 Timothy 2, vv. 12-14:

But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression. (NASB)

I have increasingly found, however, that my grasp of the biblical issues surrounding women in ministry is tenuous enough to warrant an objective reexamination of the topic. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to begin my own dialog with the two main opposing views of women in ministry: egalitarianism and complementarianism. I will focus on 1 Timothy 2:12, summarizing the exegetical approach of egalitarianism, which posits the equality of men and women in both creation and function (whether in the Church or the home), and the response of complementarians, who posit the equality of men and women in creation but assign to them distinct and complementary ecclesiastical and familial roles. The cultural and religious milieu at Ephesus which occasioned Paul's first letter to Timothy will be considered along with its implications for syntactical concerns within the Greek text of the verse in question.

Egalitarianism & Complementarianism Defined

Most of the preeminent bible scholars shaping the debate concerning the proper role of women in the Church have aligned themselves with one of two organizations: the egalitarian Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) or the complementarian Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). An overview of each organization's stated position will help delineate how egalitarians and complementarians interpret what the Bible has to say about men and women and their roles in the Body of Christ.

According to CBE's *Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Equality*, the Bible teaches that men and women are equal in that both Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God, had the privilege of relating directly to God, and shared the responsibility "of bearing and rearing children and having dominion over the created order (Gen. 1:26-28)."¹ This "full and equal partnership" between man and woman was broken by the sin of Adam and Eve; Gen. 3:16, which foretells Adam's rulership or dominance over Eve, is therefore merely a *description* of the consequences of the Fall rather than "a prescription of God's ideal order."² In Christ, women enjoy "full redemptive freedom" equal to that of men in every respect -- demonstrated, CBE argues, by the fact that God distributes spiritual and ministry giftings "without preference as to gender (Acts 2:1-21; 1 Cor. 12:7, 11, 14:31)."³ For this reason, women in the Church should be encouraged and embraced in any form of ministry to which they sense a gifting or calling, whether child care workers, ushers, worship leaders, or pastors.⁴ CBE further contends that there is no biblical basis for what is commonly termed "headship in the home." The husband's position as "head" is erroneously understood by traditionalists (and complementarians) to mean "authority" or "leader" due to a mistranslation of

the Greek word κεφαλή (lit., "head") in passages such as 1 Cor. 11:3ff. Instead, κεφαλή is meant to embody the husband's "self-giving love and service within [the marriage] relationship of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:19, 1 Pet. 3:7)."⁵ Thus, according to CBE, egalitarianism's understanding of biblical manhood and womanhood denies that there is any divinely prescribed hierarchy in the ecclesiastical or familial roles of men and women -- the equality established in God's original created order was marred by the sin of man, but has been affirmed and reestablished through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Consequently, it is both natural and expected that Christian women should be able to serve in the same positions of responsibility and ministry within the Church as men.

CBMW's *Danvers Statement* agrees with CBE* that Adam and Eve were both created in the image and likeness of God, and as such they had equal standing before Him as persons and enjoyed equal access to Him in fellowship.⁶ CBMW also agrees with CBE that the Fall "introduced distortions into the relationships between men and women."⁷ The exact nature and consequence of these distortions is where the dispute begins. Whereas CBE asserts that any hierarchy or role distinctions between men and women occurred as a result of the fall of man, CBMW states that "distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order."⁸ Though both Adam and Even shared the responsibility to fulfill God's command and blessing in Gen. 1:26-28, each had been given a distinct and complementary function to perform: Adam was to lead,

* It should also be noted that both organizations have a high view of Scripture and believe it to be inspired by God. See both CBMW's *Danvers Statement* and CBE's *Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Authority*, available for viewing online at <http://www.cbmw.org> and <http://www.cbeinternational.org>.

and Eve was to submit to his leadership while joining him as a "suitable helper" in implementing God's word.⁹ According to CBMW, the distortions which were introduced by the Fall (as listed in Gen. 3:16) warped and twisted this divine order for Adam and Eve and subsequent generations:

In the home, the husband's loving, humble headship tends to be replaced by domination or passivity; the wife's intelligent, willing submission tends to be replaced by usurpation or servility. In the church, sin inclines men toward a worldly love of power or an abdication of spiritual responsibility, and inclines women to resist limitations on their roles or to neglect the use of their gifts in appropriate ministries.¹⁰

Like CBE, CBMW views redemption in Christ as a means by which the resultant distortions of the Fall are reversed.¹¹ They differ, however, in their understanding of the dimensions of this reversal. Since CBMW interprets the role differences between man and woman as part of God's intended order in creation, redemption merely reverses the *distortions* of these role differences, leaving the distinctions themselves intact and (ideally) liberated to express God's original intent.¹² Hence complementarians view the distinct ecclesiastical and familial roles of men and women as an expression of the divine, not the sinful nature of man. Christians ignore or deny these distinctions at the peril of their families, churches, and ultimately "the culture at large."¹³ The increasing "emergence of [certain] roles for . . . women in church leadership" (e.g., women as pastors and elders) is considered by complementarians to be an unscriptural development which results from an incorrect understanding of biblical manhood and womanhood.¹⁴

Egalitarians on 1 Timothy 2:12

As the opening verses of 1 Timothy indicate, the presence of false teachers and their "strange doctrines" was an overriding concern of Paul's. He urged Timothy to "remain on at Ephesus" in order to put an end to the influence of certain individuals who had become purveyors of false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3). It is clear from Paul's other writings that falsity within the Church was common enough in his day, but the situation in the church at Ephesus was somewhat unique. Whereas other churches had to contend with heretical sources originating outside the community of faith (e.g., "false brothers" had "infiltrated" the Galatian church according to Gal. 2:4), Timothy's opponents "appear to have come from *within* the Ephesian church."¹⁵ This would have fulfilled an earlier prophecy spoken by Paul to the eldership of the Ephesian church:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30, NASB).

Scant details are provided as to the exact nature of the false doctrine which was being promulgated. The false teachers profess themselves to be "teachers of the Law" (1:7) and are preoccupied with "myths and endless genealogies" (1:4), "for which a Jewish background is likely since we hear of 'Jewish fables' in Tit. 1:14."¹⁶ Simultaneously, there is an ascetic nature to the false teaching which involved abstinence from marriage and certain foods (1 Tim. 4:3) -- since Paul goes out of his way to "emphasize the goodness of all God's creation (4:3-5)," his opponents probably "disparaged the material order."¹⁷ This combined with the false teachers' claim to "a higher, esoteric *gnosis*" which Paul actually regards as false (6:20) points to a Gnostic influence as well.¹⁸

While many commentators agree on the above conclusions, the vagueness of Paul's references to the false teachers at Ephesus and their errant doctrines has given rise to alternative theories. Egalitarian bible scholars in particular have appealed to the religious and cultural context of Ephesus in order to reconstruct a very different set of circumstances within the Ephesian church -- ultimately with a view toward interpreting 1 Tim. 2:12 in a manner which does not "prohibit the leadership of women in the church."¹⁹ The work of Catherine Clark Kroeger, an egalitarian scholar who founded the aforementioned Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), appears to enounce the preeminent egalitarian position on the Ephesian context which occasioned 1 Timothy and Paul's mandate in 1 Tim. 2:12 -- her writings will be used herein to represent egalitarianism's view on Ephesian culture in the first century A.D.

According to Kroeger, the site in ancient Asia Minor where the city of Ephesus was later founded had originally been a shrine to a female deity (ca. 5000 B.C.); legend had it that the Amazons (mythical gynecocrats) were the ones who initiated this goddess worship.²⁰ Worship of "mother goddesses" was common in ancient Asia Minor, and although there were various cultural iterations of one supreme mother goddess, they all shared common features: the "Great Mother" was the mother of other gods and men, and as such she gave birth to all life.²¹ This stronghold of goddess worship "left its stamp upon successive generations" right up until the Pauline Ephesus of the first century.²² In Ephesus, mother goddess worship was eventually syncretized into the cult of Artemis; a large temple (Artemisium) had been erected there in her honor. Kroeger argues that the longstanding practice of goddess worship had given rise to a unique matriarchal/feminist ideal in Ephesus and its environs, whereby the status of women was elevated above

that of men.²³ In the religious practices associated with the Artemisium, women enjoyed preeminence and, by Paul's time, had replaced men as the leaders of the Artemis cult.²⁴ Kroeger further states that the rites of the Artemisium (performed by priestesses) may have included dances and dramas that conveyed hostility toward the opposite sex "and reversal of gender roles."²⁵ With time and the rise of Gnosticism, this feminist pagan ideal gave way to a heresy that Eve was the savior of the human race. In rebelling against God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17), Eve obtained a secret *gnosis* from the serpent, thus liberating the human race and enabling it to achieve true spirituality.²⁶

Ultimately, Kroeger asserts, it was the influence of this mix of pagan thought that Paul was opposing not only in his first letter to Timothy, but in all the Pastoral Epistles. Some women in the Ephesian church had come under the sway of the pagan/Gnostic feminism enumerated above (2 Tim. 3:6-7) and had attempted to domineer or elevate themselves over and against the men in the church. Paul's prohibition against women in 1 Tim. 2:12 is therefore ad-duced by a set of circumstances so specific that it cannot be ap-plied in a general sense to the Church today. Moreover, the unique dynamic in Ephesus warrants a reevaluation of the inter-pretation of the verse itself. In light of her findings on the cul-tural milieu of first century Ephesus, Kroeger proposes the fol-lowing rendition of 1 Tim. 2:12:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to repre-sent herself as originator of man, but she is to be in conformity [with the Scriptures].

Response

In the complementarian view, the egalitarian position that Ephesus was a hotbed of feminism and matriarchy simply does not reflect actual history for the following reasons:

1. It draws a false dichotomy between the religious aspects of Ephesian culture and the culture at large. Kroeger herself admits that in civil life, there is no historical evidence "that women took an ascendant role over men" ²⁷ A separation between religious practice and civil life is required in order for the Kroeger's position to be viable, and in typically Hellenistic societies such as Ephesus, this simply was not the case. ²⁸ Even scholars who are sympathetic to Kroeger's work recognize the tenuousness of her historical assertions. ²⁹
2. Although their research on the Ephesian religious context is extensive, the Kroegers virtually ignore "a vast body of a historically . . . reliable and relevant quality: the approximately 4,000 Ephesian inscriptions and the burgeoning secondary literature surrounding them." ³⁰ These sources reveal that the hierarchy of leadership within the Artemisium was not dominated by female priestesses, but was rather "securely under the control of the male political establishment of Ephesus." ³¹
3. The data available in the New Testament suggests that the false teachers in the Ephesian church were men (2 Tim. 3:6, 1 Tim. 1:6-11). Acts 19:24-27ff suggests that "men took a leading role" in religious matters -- for example, Demetrius the silversmith (a man), who was in the business of fashioning idols depicting Artemis, incited a riot against Paul's teaching in defense of the goddess. ³²

Given that the historicity of the Kroegers' egalitarian construct is in dispute on *both* sides of the debate, combined with their failure to consult sources most germane to their research, one must seriously question their conclusions about first century Ephesian culture.

Syntactically, Kroeger's translation of the Greek text of 1 Tim. 2:12 is tantamount to "exegetical gymnastics" -- she has stretched

the words Paul used beyond their natural grammatical force in order to accommodate her historical approach to the religious context of Ephesus. A literal reading of the Greek compared with Kroeger's translation reveals that she has maintained much of the grammatical structure of 1 Timothy 2:12:

Literal

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man

Kroeger

I do not permit a woman to teach or to represent herself as originator of man

Unfortunately, she has ignored the syntax by translating the present active infinitive of *αυθεντέω* (to have authority) reflexively when it clearly does not have that force. The exact meaning of *αυθεντέω* is hotly contested, partially due to the extreme paucity of its occurrence in ancient Greek literature; 1 Tim. 2:12 is the only place where it occurs in the New Testament. Egalitarians insist that it has an inherently negative meaning of "domineering"³³ or, as Kroeger alleges, it embodies the pagan/Gnostic heresy which was plaguing the Ephesian church. But the most current and thorough research finds that the common usage of *αυθεντέω* during New Testament times combined with the grammatical structure of 1 Tim. 2:12 (infinitive + *ουδέ* + infinitive) gives it an indisputably neutral sense of having or exercising authority over something or someone.³⁴

Conclusion

In the final analysis, little can be asserted about the role of women in ministry from the information presented above. Instead, it has been demonstrated that the typical egalitarian approach to

1 Tim. 2:12 is does not amply or accurately explain the circumstances in Ephesus which occasioned Paul's first letter to Timothy. Thus the assertion that 1 Tim. 2:12 is adduced by such specific circumstances that it does not apply in a general sense to the church today cannot stand up to scrutiny. Further study of 1 Tim. 2:12 in its immediate context and a comparison with the tenor of other Scriptures addressing the issues of biblical manhood and womanhood must be undertaken before pronouncements on women in ministry can be made with any degree of finality. I would like to proffer that Paul's special concern in 1 Timothy for the qualifications of elders and deacons (specifically that they be "able to teach" as stated in 1 Tim. 3:2) should guide the interpretation of 2:12 -- it may very well be that Paul's purpose was to proscribe women from occupying positions of authority within the Church that are properly reserved for men due to the objective order of Creation (1 Tim. 2:13-14). Again, as to the extent of this prohibition and its applicability to practical situations, a more thorough and in-depth survey of Scripture must first be completed.

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Endnotes

¹ Christians for Biblical Equality, "Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Equality," <<http://cbeinternational.org/state.htm>>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 478.

⁷ Ibid., 478

⁸ Ibid., 478.

⁹ Mary Kassian, Women, Creation, and the Fall (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1990), 18-19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 478.

¹¹ Ibid., 478.

¹² Ibid., 478.

¹³ Ibid., 479.

¹⁴ Ibid., 478.

¹⁵ Robert R. Monti, "That You May Fight the Good Fight: An Exegetical Study of 1 Timothy 1:18," TMs [photocopy], 1999, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA, 7.

¹⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ Catherine Clark Kroeger, "1 Timothy 2:12 — A Classicist's View," in Women, Authority, and the Bible (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 225.

²⁰ Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger, I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 47.

²¹ Ibid., 50-51.

²² Ibid., 51.

²³ Ibid., 109.

²⁴ Ibid., 71.

²⁵ Ibid., 93.

²⁶ Ibid., 118, 161-165.

²⁷ Ibid., 92

²⁸ S. M. Baugh, "A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century," in Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15, eds. Andreas J. Kostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 49.

²⁹ S. M. Baugh, "The Apostle Among the Amazons" The Westminster Theological Journal 56 no. 1 (Spring, 1994): 157.

³⁰ Ibid., 162.

³¹ S. M. Baugh, "A Foreign World: Ephesus in the First Century," in Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15, eds. Andreas J. Kostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 25-28.

³² S. M. Baugh, "The Apostle Among the Amazons" The Westminster Theological Journal 56 no. 1 (Spring, 1994): 158.

³³ David M. Scholer, "1 Timothy 2:9-15 and the Place of Women's Ministry in the Church," in Women, Authority, and the Bible (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 205.

³⁴ Andreas J. Kostenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds., Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 65-104.