

Should Women Teach the Scriptures to Men?

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Some people believe that the presence of women teachers in mixed settings constitutes a violation of biblical standards. Others, however, wonder why the presence of women teachers in mixed settings is even questioned in this day of equal opportunity. So, we turn to the Scriptures. This paper represents my personal position and not that of the elders of Peninsula Bible Church. The position of the elders as a whole is to allow women to teach in mixed settings, although not all elders have arrived at that position for the same reasons. Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

The case for women prophets

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament endorse the ministry of women prophets, some of whom are depicted as having ministries to men.

The Old Testament describes Miriam, Deborah and Huldah as prophets (Exodus 15:20, Judges 4:4, 2 Kings 22:14-15). When Josiah, the king of Israel, ordered the high priest, Hilkiah, to inquire of the Lord, he and four other men went to Huldah, who spoke God's word of judgment against Israel and his word of consolation for the king (2 Kings 22:14-20).

In the New Testament, the prophet Anna spoke about Jesus "to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem," men and women alike (Luke 2:36-38). The Book of Acts reports that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who were prophets (Acts 21:9). The Apostle Paul writes of the presence of women prophets at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5). Prophets spoke for God, often employing the words "thus says the Lord," as in the case of Huldah. They were in that sense teachers, instructing people concerning God's will.

In 1 Corinthians 12:28 and 14:1, Paul gives greater priority to the prophetic gift than to the teaching gift. It would seem, then, insofar as teaching is to be distinguished from prophesying, that if women were permitted to prophesy to men with words such as "thus says the Lord," they would also be allowed to teach men.

The case for women teachers

Paul, in fact, encourages the ministry of women teachers in mixed settings: "What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (1 Corinthians 14:26). A "revelation" was a prophetic utterance (1 Corinthians 14:29-31). Based on 1 Corinthians 11:5, where Paul instructs women prophets, there is every reason to believe that a woman prophet who had a "revelation" would be able to share it when the "whole church" assembled (1 Corinthians 14:23). Because women were allowed to share a revelation (a prophecy), there is no reason to assume that they would be prohibited from sharing a psalm, a teaching, a tongue or an interpretation. In other words, there is no reason to assume that "each one" in 1 Corinthians 14:26 means "each man." When the whole church assembled in Corinth, women could both prophesy and teach.

Furthermore, Paul writes to the church in Colossae, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another ..." (Colossians 3:18). He encourages the

Colossians to teach one another without limiting women in any way. Moreover, the Book of Acts makes mention of a woman, Priscilla, who along with her husband taught a powerful male teacher in a corrective way. The fact that her name precedes that of her husband, both in Acts and in Romans, speaks of her prominence (Acts 18:26, Romans 16:3).

The Scriptures depict women both prophesying and teaching in mixed settings. There is no hint, in the texts considered thus far, that they were limited in any special way. However, Paul restricts the speech of women in two texts, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12. To those texts we now turn.

May women speak in church?

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, “The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.” Most interpreters, even those who would prohibit women from teaching in mixed settings, don’t suggest that women should not speak at all in church meetings. If Paul were prohibiting women from speaking at all in church meetings at Corinth, then he would be contradicting himself, for he allowed for women prophets and teachers in Corinth (see above). What, then, did Paul mean?

The women weren’t the only ones who needed to keep silent. Someone who would otherwise speak in a tongue “must keep silent in the church” if no interpreter is present (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). Furthermore, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:30, “But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent.” In 1 Corinthians 14:27-35, particular types of speech are in view—namely tongues and prophetic utterances. Paul wanted the Corinthians to take turns instead of interrupting each other. Everyone, not just women, must “keep silent” and not speak while someone else is speaking. That Paul specifically admonished women to keep silent implies that there was a particular problem with women in the Corinthian church. What women were doing, so that Paul admonished them to inquire of their husbands at home, is a matter of conjecture.¹ Paul’s command for women to “keep silent,” then, did not mean that they shouldn’t prophesy or teach in a public way.

On the one hand, Paul apparently encouraged women to teach in Colossae and he implicitly encouraged women to both prophesy and teach in Corinth, in each case without calling for any special restrictions. On the other hand, he placed a prohibition on women in Ephesus. What, then, of 1 Timothy 2:12?

The advance of the gospel

In 1 Timothy, Paul is writing to Timothy, whom he left in Ephesus to stop the influence of false teachers (1 Timothy 1:3). These false teachers gained a hearing among women (2 Timothy 3:6-7). Paul, in giving Timothy instructions for both men and women in 1 Timothy 2, is concerned for the advance of the gospel, urging prayers on behalf of all people and noting both that God desires all people to be saved and that Christ gave himself as a ransom for all (verses 1-7). The advance of the gospel will be well-served if the church is populated by godly women (verses 8-10).

¹ Paul commands women here not to subject themselves to their husbands but to subject “themselves,” just as both male and female prophets must be “subject” to themselves (1 Corinthians 14:32). In other words, women, just like men, must practice self-control and know when to be quiet.

How does a woman become godly? Paul addresses this concern in verse 11, literally instructing Timothy: “Let a woman in quiet learn with all submissiveness.” There was a problem in Ephesus with the way women were learning. Some were “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Paul also wrote that some of the younger widows in Ephesus learned to be idle, gossips and busybodies and that they talked about “things not proper to mention” (1 Timothy 5:13).

A woman is to learn in a particular way: “in quiet” and “with all submissiveness.” This is the same way a man is to learn. In 1 Timothy 2:2, the purpose of prayer for government authorities is that “we”—meaning all believers in Ephesus, male and female—may lead a tranquil and “quiet” life. The word “quiet,” then, is not applied solely to women. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesian church, also does not limit submissiveness to women: “and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). Women (and men) should learn quietly and submissively, not boisterously or contentiously.

In the interest of advancing the gospel, Paul in 1 Timothy 2:11 exhorted the women in Ephesus to learn in a particular way in order that they might become godly. However, in verse 12, he had a prohibition—or two prohibitions, depending on how one interprets the verse.

The meaning of 1 Timothy 2:12

All popular English translations of the New Testament, which was originally written in Greek, in the interest of readability, fall short of a literal, word-for-word translation. In the New American Standard Bible, 1 Timothy 2:12 reads: “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.” Three interpretive options emerge in connection with teaching by women: 1) Paul is prohibiting women from teaching men. 2) Paul is prohibiting women from teaching men in a certain way. 3) Paul is prohibiting women from teaching without respect to who they teach.

Many scholars who advocate option one and understand Paul to be prohibiting women from teaching men more or less directly apply such an understanding to all churches today. Most of these scholars believe the Scriptures allow women to teach women and children, and some believe women should be allowed to teach men in certain circumstances.²

However, a literal, word-for-word translation indicates that Paul is *not* saying anything about whether women can teach men per se and inveighs against option one. When translated in a literal way, 1 Timothy 2:12 reads, “But to teach by a woman I am not allowing or (*oudē*) to exercise authority over (*authentēō*) a man, but to be in quiet.” Paul is either prohibiting women from teaching men in a certain way (option two) or he is prohibiting women from teaching without respect to who they teach (option three).

The nature of the prohibition

What exactly is Paul prohibiting? First, is he prohibiting one thing or two things? Does the word translated “or” (*oudē*) join the two phrases or separate them? A case can be made for either understanding.

² For example, one scholar argues that women should be prohibited from “preaching ... and the teaching of Bible and doctrine in the church, in colleges, and in seminaries.” However, he would allow women to lead some kinds of Bible studies, “depending on how they are done.” He also would allow women to engage in “evangelistic witnessing, counseling, [and] teaching subjects other than Bible or doctrine.” (Douglas Moo, *What Does it Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?* [bible.org, www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2829, 2007]). If the application of a biblical interpretation is this complex, requiring the splitting of hairs over types and venues of teaching, one might question whether such an interpretation is more in keeping with the approach of the Pharisees than the spirit of the New Testament.

Elsewhere, Paul uses the word *oudē* to unite words in order to reinforce a single coherent idea (Romans 3:10, 9:6; 1 Timothy 6:16; 1 Corinthians 4:3). If the second part of verse 12 reinforces the first part, then Paul would be prohibiting one thing, not two things. If such were the case, we might understand Paul to be saying, “But I am not allowing a woman to teach *in a way* that exercises authority over a man.”³

The two phrases (“to teach by a woman” and “to exercise authority over a man”) are separated not only by *oudē* but also by the words “I am not allowing.” Although it is grammatically possible that the entire second phrase (“to exercise authority over a man”) modifies the entire first phrase (“to teach by a woman”), it would be a grammatical stretch to import only one word from the second phrase (“man”) into the first phrase (“to teach by a woman”). In other words, it would be a grammatical stretch to derive this meaning: “But to teach *a man* by a woman I am not allowing or to exercise authority over a man.”⁴

If Paul is prohibiting two things, he is in the first phrase prohibiting a woman’s teaching *without respect to who she teaches*. Paul would not therefore be prohibiting women in Ephesus from teaching men; he would be prohibiting women from teaching in some other way, perhaps any way.

The second phrase, which some translate with the words “to exercise authority over a man,” is difficult to translate because this is the only time the Greek verb *authenteō* is used in the New Testament and it was rarely used elsewhere. Suggested translation values also include “to dominate.” The inconclusive evidence concerning the meaning of *authenteō* inveighs against dogmatic conclusions regarding 1 Timothy 2:12.

If Paul is prohibiting one thing, the first part of verse 12 could be loosely translated in these ways:

— “I am not allowing a woman to teach in a way that exercises authority over a man.”

— “I am not allowing a woman to teach in a way that dominates a man.”

If Paul is prohibiting two things, verse 12 could be loosely translated in these ways:

— “I am not allowing a woman to teach (without respect to who she teaches) or to exercise authority over a man.”

— “I am not allowing a woman to teach (without respect to who she teaches) or to dominate a man.”

A grammatical case can be made for any of these translations. Paul is either prohibiting women from teaching men in a certain way (option two) or he is prohibiting women from teaching without respect to who they teach (option three). Again, he is *not* saying anything about whether women may teach men per se (option one).

Why women should learn

However we interpret the prohibition, the more significant phrase in verse 12 from a grammatical standpoint comes at the end: “but to be in quiet.” The grammatical emphasis in verses 11-12 falls not on

³ Scholar Philip B. Payne, who has researched every use of the word *oudē* by Paul, argues that “Paul typically uses *oudē* not to convey two separate ideas but to join two expressions together in order to convey a single idea.” (Philip B. Payne, “1 Tim 2:12 and the Use of *oudē* to Combine Two Elements to Express a Single Idea,” *New Testament Studies* [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, April 2008], 235-253.)

⁴ If this were Paul’s meaning, he could have placed the words “I am not allowing” either at the beginning or end of the sentence. By placing them in the middle, between the two phrases, he is either separating them entirely or joining them entirely, not importing only one word from one phrase into another phrase.

a prohibition against women teaching but on an exhortation for women to learn in a particular way. Paul wanted women to learn, and to learn properly.⁵

In 1 Timothy 2:13-14, then, Paul illustrates why it is important for women to learn properly, not why women shouldn't teach: "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." Although some interpreters believe Paul is justifying the prohibition against women based on the creation story, the more likely conclusion is that the creation story illustrates what happens when a woman learns poorly: she opens herself up to deception.⁶

Verse 15 presents its own interpretive difficulties, but in the flow of Paul's argument, it serves to promote godliness among women. The verse reads, "But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint." All the traits in verse 15—childbearing, faith, love, sanctity and self-restraint—are those characteristic of godly women of good works.⁷

The reason for Paul's prohibition

The thrust of 1 Timothy 2, as it concerns women in Ephesus, is as follows: 1) Verses 1-7: Paul wants the gospel to advance. 2) Verses 8-10: The advance of the gospel hinges in part on the godliness of the women in the Ephesian church. 3) Verses 11-15: To become godly and keep from being deceived, women in the Ephesian church should learn properly.

What, then, of the prohibition against teaching by women? In its time and place, the prohibition against teaching men in a certain way or against teaching without reference to who they taught somehow served to advance the gospel. One can make sense of the prohibition in light of the problem with the way at least some women were learning in Ephesus. Unlearned people make poor, even heretical, teachers. If Timothy was able to correct this problem, then perhaps we might envision Paul instructing him to lift the prohibition or part of the prohibition at some point. Or, perhaps the prohibition was based on some cultural factor. Some scholars have suggested that the prohibition was based on the influence of the female-dominated pagan temple of Artemis in Ephesus or the rise of the so-called "new Roman woman," either or both of which may have emboldened women in the church, against Paul's wishes, to dominate men. Some have suggested that Ephesian women in particular needed to learn that Adam was created first, not Eve. The Messiah was the second Adam, not the second Eve. Paul, in fact, notes in 1

⁵ The prohibition in verse 12 is introduced by the word translated "but" (*de*), a conjunction that indicates at most only mild contrast and is often translated with the word "and." However, the exhortation in verse 12 "to be in quiet" is introduced by a different word, also translated by the word "but" (*alla*), though it is a much stronger word. The words "in quiet" in verse 12 are the same two words that Paul used in verse 11, where he was commanding women to learn. "In quiet" is the correct posture of learning. In verse 12, the verb "allowing," in connection with the prohibition, appears in the indicative mood, not the imperative. The command, appearing in the imperative mood, is in verse 11: "Let a woman in quiet learn with all submissiveness." The prohibition at the beginning of verse 12 is the minor point between two expressed desires that women learn properly, one in verse 11 and one at the end of verse 12.

⁶ The exhortation to be "in quiet," the posture of learning, was the last reference in verse 12. Verses 13-14, then, more naturally explain why a woman should learn in quiet, not why a woman shouldn't teach. If Paul is prohibiting women from teaching based on the order of creation, he never says why the order of creation is determinative; he never says why being created first makes one qualified to teach and why being created second prohibits one from teaching. Furthermore, in the history of Israel, God often overturned cultural preference given to the firstborn. Paul also argues from the order of creation in 1 Corinthians 11:8-10—in that case to emphasize the necessity of the woman.

⁷ I have never come across a completely satisfying interpretation of verse 15, nor have I come up with one myself. I suspect that there is something that would have been clear to Timothy that remains unclear to modern readers. I also suspect that if we were able to understand verse 15 as Timothy was able to, we'd be able to make better sense of the equally problematic verse 12.

Timothy 2 that there is one mediator between God and humanity, the “man” Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).

Generally and grammatically, the reason for the prohibition seems clear: it served to advance the gospel. Specifically and culturally, how it served to advance the gospel remains less clear.

Encouraging women to teach

Bridging to twenty-first century Silicon Valley, we might ask whether such a prohibition serves to advance the gospel in our time and place, especially inasmuch as other biblical texts, including some written by Paul, the author of the prohibition, depict women prophesying and/or teaching in mixed settings. It seems to me that the practice of prohibiting women from teaching in church meetings that include men is more likely to impede than advance of the gospel in our part of the world, which favors equal opportunity and opposes restrictions based on gender. There remain certain places in the world where prohibiting women from teaching men in church meetings may serve to advance the gospel, at least for a while. There remain, of course, certain ways of teaching that should be prohibited for all teachers in all times and places regardless of gender—for example, teaching in a way that dominates those of the opposite sex. In my view, nothing in the Scriptures, however, compels us to prohibit women from teaching men today in the Silicon Valley simply because of their gender.

We should be willing to look foolish in our world for adhering to the teachings of the Scriptures. However, I see no reason to place an unnecessary stumbling block before those who consider it foolish to restrict women. Paul notes that Christ crucified is a “stumbling block” to some and “foolishness” to others (1 Corinthians 1:23). By encouraging women to teach, we might hope that more people in our world will confront the “stumbling block” and “foolishness” of the cross, not the stumbling block and foolishness of the church.

Based on his understanding of 1 Timothy 2:12, Ray Stedman, the first pastor of Peninsula Bible Church, wrote: “Women can teach within the context of church meetings. They are certainly free to teach children and other women without question, but are free to teach men as well if what they are teaching is not a challenge to the understanding of doctrine held by the elders of the church.”⁸ (One might add, of course, that teaching by anyone, male or female, should not challenge the doctrine held by the elders of the church, regardless of the audience.)

Based on my understanding of the Scriptures, I believe that a women at Peninsula Bible Church should not be prohibited from teaching in meetings when men are present simply because they are women. On the contrary, I believe that the women teachers in our midst enrich the life of the church by instructing our women, our children and our men. Furthermore, I believe that encouraging gifted women to teach serves both the advance of the gospel and our church’s mission to the world. Therefore, gifted women should be encouraged to teach.

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⁸ Ray Stedman, *Should a Woman Teach in Church?* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Discovery Papers, Catalog No. 3260, Nov. 21, 1976.)