

Women in 1 Timothy 2:9-14

A comparison of Complementarian and Egalitarian views through Evangelical and Missional Hermeneutics

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The issue of women in leadership is contentious within the Western church. Yet in an egalitarian society like New Zealand, placing restrictions on women's involvement in leadership and teaching creates a barrier to mission. At the centre of this debate is the passage in 1 Timothy 2:9-14,¹ and particularly 1 Timothy 2:12. In this essay I will consider this passage from the context of mission in New Zealand and reflect on how our hermeneutical approach to this passage can aid our participation in mission in New Zealand.

Mission challenge

New Zealand was founded, in terms of European settlement, primarily from working class immigrants coming to escape the poor working conditions and social hierarchies of England. Our culture is one of the most proudly egalitarian in the world: in a recent survey, 55% of New Zealanders believed that New Zealand's record on gender equality is better than most other Western countries.² One of our core values is gender equality, seen for example in the fact that we were the first country in the world to give women the right to vote.

A key missional challenge in this context is the perception that Christianity is oppressive to women and does not support the equality of women. For example, in one internet article entitled *20 Reasons to Abandon Christianity*, reason number 16 is stated to be as follows:³

Christianity is misogynistic. Misogyny is fundamental to the basic writings of Christianity. In passage after passage, women are encouraged—no, commanded—to accept an inferior role, and to be ashamed of themselves for the simple fact that they are women.

The article goes on to list numerous Bible passages which it contends are misogynistic, including 1 Tim 2:11-12. I have seen this perception in my own personal context: in discussions with my non-Christian friends and family, they have raised Christianity's stance on women as a barrier to them coming to faith.

The view that historically Christianity has not supported the equality of women is not without basis. As Tucker has shown, until recently theological leadership in the Western church has been an exclusively male domain. Women were excluded from this elite club because, drawing from 1

¹ All references and quotations from the Bible are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated. For the purposes of this essay I have not considered verse 15, although this is usually included as part of the passage.

² Research New Zealand, "Latest special report," *Research New Zealand*. www.researchnz.com/special-media.html.

³ Chaz Bufe, "20 Reasons to Abandon Christianity," See Sharp Press. www.seesharppress.com/20reasons.html#numbersixteen

Tim 2:14, they were considered to be more easily deceived than men.⁴ Feminist theologian Ruether points to a “patriarchal and hierarchical reading of the system of Christian symbols as a whole” as contributing to the oppression of women by Christianity. She argues that the New Testament reflects a struggle between patriarchal patterns and liberating, egalitarian influences.⁵ She points to this passage in 1 Tim 2:9-15 as being central to the subordination of women by church leadership through the ages, since women were considered to be inherently secondary in creation and guilty for humanity’s fall into sin.⁶

Even today, a significant stream of Christianity continues to severely limit the role of women.⁷ There is ongoing controversy and division between evangelicals around the world on the role of women, particularly in relation to leadership roles in the church and roles in the family.⁸ In New Zealand we are influenced by these international theological trends. Complementarian⁹ scholars such as Grudem, Köstenberger and Schreiner teach that women should not be permitted to teach men, while egalitarians scholars such as Marshall, Keener and Payne endorse women having a teaching role.¹⁰ The polarity between egalitarians and complementarians is an ongoing challenge for evangelical Christianity both in terms of our life together as members of the body of Christ and in our witness to the world.¹¹

Both sides at times speak of the pain resulting from this conflict and division. Keener writes of the accusations that have been levelled at some authors over this issue and feels that he needs to defend his commitment to the authority of Scripture and his relationship with Jesus Christ.¹² He was initially reluctant to make his views public due to pressures from his contemporaries.¹³ Complementarians in the West also face powerful pressures to allow women to lead and teach in churches. Schreiner, for example, describes the almost unbearable emotional tension he feels when lecturing on these issues, particularly when women who are training for ministry are in his seminary class.¹⁴ Yet he and others like Köstenberger have considered the biblical evidence carefully and concluded that the Bible proscribes female leadership in the church; they see taking this stance as being faithful to God and his Word.¹⁵

⁴ Ruth A. Tucker, “The Changing Roles of Women in Ministry: The Early Church Through the 18th Century,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 23-38, 26.

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Sexism and Misogyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34 (2014): 83-94, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁷ C.S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 2.

⁸ Rebecca Merrill Groothuis and Ronald W. Pierce, “Introduction,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Pierce and Groothuis, 13-19.

⁹ There is debate about the labels used for the two main views on women’s roles. For my present purposes I will use “complementarian” and “egalitarian”.

¹⁰ I. Howard Marshall, “Women in Ministry: A Further Look at 1 Timothy 2,” in *Women, Ministry and the Gospel: Exploring New Paradigms* ed. Mark Husbands and Timothy Larsen (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 53-78, 66.

¹¹ Ronald W. Pierce, “Contemporary Evangelicals for Gender Equality,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Pierce and Groothuis, 58-75, 74.

¹² Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 11-12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15: A Dialogue with Scholarship,” in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* eds. A.J Köstenberger and T. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 85-120, 85-86.

¹⁵ A.J Köstenberger, “Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles,” in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles* eds. A. Köstenberger and T. Wilder (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 1-27.

Hermeneutical approach

The approach that we take in applying Scripture to our particular context is crucial as it strongly influences our missional practice and outcomes. We need to acknowledge our hermeneutical approach and what values inform that approach, aware that there is no such thing as a neutral stance on Scripture. As Scholer so aptly points out:¹⁶

The concept of genuinely objective biblical interpretation is a myth. All interpretation is socially located, individually skewed, and ecclesiastically and theologically conditioned... All biblical interpreters, regardless of where they now stand on the issue of women in ministry, have been deeply influenced by both the sexism and misogyny of our culture and also the currents of 19th century women's rights and 20th century feminist movements.

As an evangelical, mission-oriented Christian, my hermeneutical approach is influenced by evangelical hermeneutics and missional hermeneutics. I will outline these approaches in this section and then apply the principles of these hermeneutics to the passage in 1 Tim 2:9-14 in the following section.

An *evangelical hermeneutic* views the Bible as God's Word, not dictated to us directly by God but spoken in human words in human history.¹⁷ An evangelical hermeneutic therefore attempts to maintain a balance between the Bible's eternal relevance and its historical particularity arising from the context in which it was written.¹⁸ Evangelicals believe that to lean too far towards the former takes us into fundamentalism whereas to lean too far towards the latter leads to liberalism.¹⁹ As Fee acknowledges, the challenge with this approach is that it inevitably leads to diversity and ambiguity amongst evangelicals on some issues: where some see timeless principles others will see cultural trappings.²⁰ This is particularly so in relation to the roles of women, as the Bible was written at a time of grievous oppression of women.²¹ However as evangelicals we believe that God in his wisdom chose to give us his Word in this way: that he did not give us timeless, non-culture-bound theological propositions to be believed and commands to be obeyed, but that he chose to speak to us through historically particular circumstances.²²

A *missional hermeneutic* emphasises the missionary character of the Bible. In the words of Flemming, it "attempts to read Scripture in light of God's mission and from the vantage point of a people engaged in God's mission".²³ As Brownson has argued, a key to interpreting and appropriating the New Testament is to recognise that it was produced in the context of mission by people engaged in mission.²⁴ Moreover, when we employ a missional hermeneutic we read Scripture with an awareness that we have the opportunity to participate in the ongoing story of

¹⁶ W.D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 103.

¹⁷ Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate," in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Pierce and Groothuis, 364-380, 368.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 369.

²¹ Roger Nicole, "Biblical Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Questions of Gender," in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Pierce and Groothuis, 355-363, 361.

²² Fee, "Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate," 370.

²³ G.M. Wieland, "Reading Acts Missionally in a City of Migrants," in *God's People on the Move: Biblical and Global Perspectives on Migration and Mission* eds. vanThanh Nguyen and John M. Prior (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 144-158.

²⁴ Ibid.

God's mission.²⁵ We consciously read Scripture from the point of view of our own contemporary mission context and seek to engage with the text in a way that informs our ongoing participation in God's mission.²⁶

1 Timothy 2:9-14

We turn now to consider the passage in 1 Tim 2:9-14, where Paul urges men to pray without anger, women to dress modestly and where he prohibits women from teaching and having authority over a man, because Adam was formed before Eve and Eve was the one who was deceived. This passage is controversial and seems quite offensive when read through the lens of contemporary Western culture. Evangelicals are divided on how it should be applied in our context today.

Complementarians such as Köstenberger argue that the passage constitutes a general prohibition on women for all times from teaching or having authority over a man, based on the reasoning that Paul gives from the Genesis account of Adam being created first and Eve being the one who was deceived.²⁷ In terms of the balance inherent in evangelical hermeneutics discussed above, complementarians emphasise the Bible's eternal relevance rather than context in relation to this passage.

Egalitarians, on the other hand, emphasise the original context when interpreting this passage rather than seeing its prohibition on women teaching as representing an eternal principle of Scripture. Keener points out that this is the only passage in the Bible that explicitly forbids or limits women in a teaching role and that it must be interpreted in the light of Paul's other writings and practice.²⁸ As he points out, the biggest problem with interpreting 1 Tim 2:11-14 as excluding women from teaching roles in the church is that elsewhere Paul commended women for such roles even though this commendation was counter-cultural in his time.²⁹ In his research, Winter found very little evidence of female professional teachers in the Hellenistic world.³⁰ Yet in Romans 16:1-2 Paul commends Phoebe to the church, and describes her as a deacon from another church who has been a benefactor of Paul and many others. As the carrier of Paul's letter, Phoebe could be asked to explain to the church anything ambiguous in the letter; Paul, by recommending her, wishes the church to understand that she is qualified to do so.³¹ In Romans 16:3 Paul commends and greets Prisca, describing her as his co-worker. In Acts 18:24-26, Luke describes how Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside, a man "well-versed in the scriptures", and "explained the Way of God to him more accurately." Luke's description implies approval of Priscilla's teaching rather than censure. The respect that she was accorded is seen in the fact that in every passage about Priscilla and Aquila's ministry, Paul and Luke list Priscilla's name first even though this was contrary to Greek convention.³² In Romans 16:7, Paul greets Junia whom he describes as "prominent among the apostles". Overall, in Romans 16 Paul mentions roughly twice as many men as women but commends over twice as many women for their work in the Lord.³³

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Köstenberger, "Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles," 1-27, 17, 21.

²⁸ Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 17-18.

²⁹ Ibid., 237.

³⁰ Marshall, "Women in Ministry," 69.

³¹ Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 238.

³² Philip B. Payne, "The Bible Teaches the Equal Standing of Man and Woman," *Priscilla Papers* 29 (2015): 3-10, 6.

³³ Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 240.

It is helpful at this point to consider briefly the original meaning of 1 Tim 2:12. There is disagreement among scholars over the interpretation of *oude*, the conjunction linking the words for teaching and assuming authority. Payne argues that Paul is not prohibiting two separate activities, but is prohibiting women from assuming authority to teach men. Köstenberger rebuts this, arguing that the *oude* joins two verbs with positive connotations and if there is one overarching idea it is that women should not serve in authoritative church positions, whether by teaching men or by ruling.

Another key challenge is defining the word *authentēin*. *Authentēin* is a Biblical hapax, making its meaning extremely difficult to determine.³⁴ Towner points out, drawing from extra-biblical uses of the word, that it has a range of potential meanings: to rule/reign, control/dominate, act independently, be the originator of something, or murder.³⁵ He narrows the likely range in this situation to “have authority over”, “assume authority” or “domineer, usurp authority or abuse authority”.³⁶ BDAG defines it as “to assume a stance of independent authority, give orders to, dictate to”.³⁷ Belleville shows that since World War II *authentēin* has been translated as “to have authority”, whereas in earlier translations dating from the second century through to the King James Version, there was an almost unbroken tradition of rendering this verb as “to dominate,” “to domineer” or “to usurp authority”.³⁸ In Pauline discussions of “authority”, the noun *exousia* and related verb *exousiazō* are the standard terms.³⁹ What was it about the Ephesian situation that prompted Paul to use this unusual word *authentēin*?

We do not have a comprehensive picture of the situation in the Ephesian church, but there are some details that we can gather from the text. We know that the church was combatting false teaching (1 Tim 1:3-7; 4:1-3) and it is possible that the false teaching was being spread by women (1 Tim 5:13; 2 Tim 3:6-7).⁴⁰ Keener points out that women in that time were uneducated and not knowledgeable in the Scriptures, so it was inappropriate to allow them to teach; he believes that Paul’s long-term solution is for them to be educated (1 Tim 2:11) so that they can then teach.⁴¹

The cult of Artemis was highly influential in Ephesus and it exalted women over men.⁴² There was also the phenomena of the Roman “new woman” who claimed for herself the same sexual freedoms as men enjoyed and used contraception and abortion to avoid having children.⁴³ Marshall concludes that it seems that the Ephesian women were behaving in unseemly ways: in the way that they dressed (2:9), teaching in a domineering way (2:12) and probably also behaving as emancipated “new women” and rejecting marriage and childbearing (5:11-14).⁴⁴ This

³⁴ G.M. Wieland, *1 Timothy 2:12* (Auckland: Carey Baptist College, 2016), 3.

³⁵ P.H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 220.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁷ F.W. Danker, revised and ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 150.

³⁸ Linda L. Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority: 1 Timothy 2:11-15,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, Pierce and Groothuis, 205-223, 209-210.

³⁹ Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 221-222.

⁴⁰ Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 111-112.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴² Belleville, “Teaching and Usurping Authority,” 219.

⁴³ Howard Marshall, “The Pastoral Epistles in Recent Study,” in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles* eds. A. Köstenberger and T. Wilder (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 268-324, 303.

⁴⁴ Marshall, “Women in Ministry,” 60-61.

behaviour went against the cultural expectations and values of the time and was bringing the gospel into disrepute.⁴⁵

This brings us to consider the impact of a missional hermeneutic on our understanding of this passage. Although there is debate around the timing and authorship of the letter, it is reasonable to conclude that it was written by Paul at a particular point in the early church's mission and to a particular situation in Ephesus. Some have argued that Paul's main intention in writing 1 Timothy was to deal with internal church problems such as combatting false teaching, or establishing church order, or even to encourage the believers to conform to their surrounding culture in order to avoid persecution.⁴⁶ However I concur with Gruenler's conclusion that Paul's primary purpose was to encourage the Ephesian church to further its mission mandate and to adopt a Christian lifestyle that would maximise its effectiveness in reaching the unreached with the gospel.⁴⁷

We see the mission orientation of 1 Timothy in a number of ways. It was written by Paul, the greatest missionary of the early church, to Timothy whom he describes as an evangelist in his subsequent letter to this church (2 Tim 4:5). There are numerous references in the letter to God and Jesus' role as our Saviour and Paul and Timothy's role as an apostles of the gospel (1:1, 15, 16; 2:3-6, 7; 4:10-16).

The missional heart of God is described just a few verses before 1 Tim 2:9-14. Paul teaches that "God our Saviour ... desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" and that Jesus is the mediator between God and humankind (2:4-6). Paul then describes his role as a "herald and apostle" of God's mission (2:7) and directly links this mission focus to 1 Tim 2:9-14 by the words "I desire, then..." (2:8). It seems therefore that men engaging in angry disputes and women dressing immodestly and flaunting their wealth were harming the mission of the church to reach the lost. Paul has earlier urged Timothy to stop the false teachers who were diverting some Ephesians away from the true faith (1:3-7). His prohibition on women teaching and assuming authority may be an outworking of this command as the women may have been instrumental in spreading the false teaching.⁴⁸ False teaching is not only a hindrance to the life of the church but also to its ability to participate in God's mission to the world.

It is sometimes argued that there is a strong tendency in 1 Timothy to urge the church to conform to the prevailing culture.⁴⁹ However the motivation behind Paul's teaching is that Christians' behaviour will further the church's mission and not dishonour the gospel. For example, Paul urges slaves to honour their masters, but his reasoning is so that God's name and the teaching of the church will not be blasphemed (1 Tim 6:1). He teaches that church leaders are to be above reproach and well thought of by outsiders (3:2,7). He urges Timothy as a man of God to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith and love and to make a good confession in the presence of others (6:11-12). His vice list describes behaviour that is "contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1:9-11). He makes it clear that he is writing the letter so that the church will know how to behave as God's household and bulwark of the truth (3:15). In other words, the church is called to be a witness to the world of God's truth and how he calls us to live. Thus Ho has rightly argued that the call for sound teaching and godly leadership that we see in the letter stems from a missionary motivation rather than from a desire to maintain a low,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁶ Royce Gordon Gruenler, "The Mission-Lifestyle Setting of 1 Tim 2:8-15," *JETS* 41 (June 1998): 215-238, 224, 231.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 216.

⁴⁸ Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 111-112.

⁴⁹ Oberlinner cited in Marshall, "The Pastoral Epistles in Recent Study," 298.

conformist profile in the prevailing culture.⁵⁰ For Paul, God's mission and the church's participation in it were the top priority.

A mission approach for my context

If we also make God's mission and our participation in that mission in our own context our top priority, what principles can we draw out of 1 Tim 2:9-14? How do we engage with this passage in our own contemporary mission context in a way that informs our ongoing participation in God's mission here and now?

The above discussion highlights some of the difficulties we face when drawing transcultural principles from a passage such as 1 Tim 2:9-14, particularly when there have been such radical cultural shifts such as we have seen in the West in the last hundred years.⁵¹ As Fee observes, the contemporary Western home is radically different from the first century Greco-Roman one. Western women are as well educated as men and have many opportunities to pursue careers outside the home, whereas in Paul's time there were very limited opportunities for women who were mostly uneducated, their main role was in the household.⁵² Marshall notes that whereas in Paul's day it was presumably considered inappropriate for a wife to teach her husband and it was considered immoral for a woman to engage in public roles outside the home, this is not so in contemporary Western culture.⁵³ So the hindrances to mission that existed in the Ephesian context, namely of women being uneducated and unable to teach or become involved in public life, do not exist in New Zealand today.

In fact the converse is true: limiting the role of women brings the church into disrepute in our context, because it breaches a core societal value of gender equality. Limiting the involvement of women in leadership also reduces the church's effectiveness in mission because it reduces the personnel available (the workers are still few) and prevents some from contributing in the way that they feel called by God to minister.⁵⁴

Liefeld advocates applying a missional hermeneutic to this passage such as Paul set out in 1 Corinthians 9:20 (NIV) where he "became like one under the law ... so as to win those under the law". Liefeld rightly argues that the restrictions that Paul advocated in Ephesus for a missional purpose were appropriate there, but should not be applied in our context where they will be a hindrance to conversions.⁵⁵ It seems to me that if Paul was writing this letter to a church in New Zealand today, he would be urge both women and men who are called by God to teach and lead to operate in that ministry, and for the church to fully support that, for the sake of the gospel.

The current division within the evangelical church on the role of women is in itself harmful to our mission, just as the behaviour of the Ephesians described in this passage was harming that church's mission effectiveness. While we are unlikely to overcome the division between egalitarians and complementarians in the near future, it is imperative that we extend grace and love to those with whom we disagree, recognising them as sisters and brothers in Christ. This conflict is also exacerbated by faulty conceptions of the nature of leadership. As Marshall suggests, the church could avoid the issues we have in relation to women's ministry if we

⁵⁰ Ho cited in Marshall, "The Pastoral Epistles in Recent Study," 296.

⁵¹ Fee, "Hermeneutics and the Gender Debate," 379.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Marshall, "Women in Ministry," 59, 63-64.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁵ W. Liefeld, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 114.

remember Jesus' model of leadership and ministry as humble, sacrificial service. Domination, hierarchies, worldly positions and assertions of gender superiority by either gender are wrong in any situation and fail to reflect the character of our God.⁵⁶

Conclusion

It is tragic that a letter written by Paul to encourage the Ephesian church in its mission and to correct behaviours that were hindering that mission, has itself become a barrier to mission in contemporary New Zealand and other Western countries. This is due to dramatic societal and cultural changes and a failure, I believe, by many in church leadership to correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15 NIV), favouring a static hermeneutical approach rather than considering the principles and priorities behind Paul's teaching. A missiological hermeneutic may be helpful in resolving the impasse in evangelical hermeneutics in relation to the role of women. By carefully choosing our hermeneutical approach and by keeping in mind the missional priority espoused by Paul, we can explain issues like the role of women in a way that resonates with the lost in our culture rather than erecting a barrier to the gospel. We can explain that this passage was written to a specific situation where the behaviour of some members of a church was creating a barrier to the gospel and that in many other situations the leadership of women is commended and celebrated in Scripture.

⁵⁶ Marshall, "Women in Ministry," 62.

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