

## Can Women Exercise Authority in the Church?

1 Corinthians 14:33–35; 1 Timothy 2:11–12

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In our discussion of male leadership in the church, we walked phrase by phrase through the text of 1 Timothy 2:8-15. We will do the same as we discuss God's design for women. The biblical model is highly controversial in today's culture. But if Christians are to reflect God's nature, they must live by His wisdom rather than the world's.

In 1 Timothy 2, Paul addresses women in the Ephesian assembly who wanted to take over teaching roles. He wrote, "A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet" (1 Timothy 2:11–12). Paul here defines women as learners during the worship service. They are not to be teachers in that context, but neither are they to be shut out of the learning process.

While it may seem obvious to us that women should be taught God's Word, that was not true for those (like some at Ephesus, cf. 1 Timothy 1:7) who came from a Jewish background. First-century Judaism did not esteem women. Although they were not barred from attending synagogue, neither were they encouraged to learn. Most ancient religions—and even some religions today—perceive women as unworthy of participating in religious life. Unfortunately, that historical treatment of women continues to incite modern feminism.

The traditional treatment of women in Ephesus partially explains why some of them in the church overreacted to their suppression by seeking a dominant position. Paul rebukes them for that. Before he does, however, he affirms their right to learn.

In 1 Timothy 2:11 Paul qualifies the way in which women are to be learners: They are to "quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness." "Submissiveness" translates *hupotagē*, the noun form of *hupotassō*, which means "to line up under." In the context of the worship service, then, women are to be quiet and be subject to the church leadership.

Some have tried to evade the plain meaning of the text by arguing that "quietly" refers to a woman's meek and quiet spirit. Women, they contend, can preach or teach as long as they do it *with the proper attitude*. Others go to the opposite extreme and use this text to prohibit women from ever talking in church under any circumstance—even to the person she is sitting next to! Neither of those options is valid, however. The context makes the meaning of "quietly" quite clear.

In verse 12, Paul defines what he meant: "I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man." Women are to keep quiet in the sense of not teaching, and they are to demonstrate

submission by not usurping authority.

The Greek word translated “allow,” *epitrepō*, is always used in the New Testament to speak of permitting people to do what they want. Paul’s choice of words implies that some women in Ephesus desired to teach and have authority. In today’s church, as in Ephesus, some women are dissatisfied with their God-given roles. They want prominent positions, including opportunities to exercise authority over men. There is only one biblical way to handle those situations for the good of everyone concerned, and that is to do what Paul did. He directly forbade women from taking the authoritative pastor-teacher roles in the church.

Paul also forbids women from exercising “authority over a man.” The Greek word translated “exercise authority over,” *authentein*, appears only here in the New Testament. Some have attempted to evade the force of Paul’s prohibition by arguing that *authentein* refers to abusive or destructive authority. Women, according to this view, can both teach and exercise authority over men so long as it is not abusive or destructive. [1](Aida Besancon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989], 87-88) Others claim it carries the idea of “author” or “originator,” thus Paul is actually saying, “I do not allow a woman to teach or proclaim herself author of man.” [2](R.C. Kroeger and C.C. Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992], 192)

In a study of the extrabiblical uses of *authentein*, however, Dr. George Knight concludes that the common meaning is “to have authority over.” [3](*The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids, MA: Eerdmans, 1992], 141-42) Paul, then, forbids women from exercising any type of authority over men in the church, including teaching.

These instructions to Timothy echo what Paul earlier commanded the Corinthians: “As in all the churches of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says . . . it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Corinthians 14:33–35, NIV). Many claim Paul was addressing a cultural issue in Corinth—nothing that ought to concern our contemporary culture. But they fail to let the text speak for itself: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:33–34, NIV). That isn’t a cultural issue; it is God’s standard for all churches.

The context implies that the silence Paul commands is not intended to preclude women from speaking at all but to prevent them from speaking in tongues and preaching in the church. As in Ephesus, certain women in Corinth were seeking prominent positions in the church, particularly by abusing the gifts of speaking in tongues and prophesying. Yet these women, who joined in the chaotic self-expression Paul had been condemning, should not have been speaking at all. In God’s order for the church, women should “subject themselves, just as the Law also says” (1 Corinthians 14:34).

Women may be highly gifted teachers and leaders, but those gifts are not to be exercised over men in the context of the church. That is true not because women are spiritually inferior to men but because God’s law *commands it*. He has ordained order in His creation—an order that reflects His own nature and therefore should be reflected in His church. Anyone ignoring or rejecting God’s order, then, weakens the church and dishonors Him.

Next time, we’ll look at what a woman’s submission looks like in action.

(Adapted from [Divine Design](#). All Scripture quotations are from the [New American Standard Bible](#), unless otherwise indicated.)

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