

BaptistWay Bible Series for June 18: Women and men in the church

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- 1 Timothy 2:8-15

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There once was a young college student who played on the men's tennis team. At the university he attended, a woman coached both the women and the men. One of her responsibilities as coach was to lead a Bible study with her teams.

The young man became greatly troubled by the fact that he was sitting under the teaching of his female coach. He had read 1 Timothy 2:12 and had difficulty reconciling this passage with what he saw taking place. After much consideration, the young man eventually decided to quit the tennis team. Is this how one is to interpret this passage? Did he overreact?



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Instructions for men (1 Timothy 2:8)

Paul makes known clearly his desires for the attitude of men in worship. The phrase “I want” communicates a wish with the force of a command. Thus, he is not making a suggestion; he is laying down ground rules.

First, Paul declares this rule is for men “everywhere.” There are to be no exceptions. Second, he specifies the instructions. As men raise their hands in prayer (a common prayer posture), they are to be holy hands. They are to avoid simply going through the motions. Men are to be in the right relationship with God when they worship. Third, men are to be in right relationship with others, for Paul enjoins them to pray “without anger or disputing.” This echoes Jesus’ own teaching about seeking the forgiveness of those who have something against us before making offerings to God (Matthew 5:23-24).

While Paul is not specific by any means, one cannot help but think Paul is speaking from the context of problems in the Ephesian church he addressed in the previous chapter.

Instructions for women (2:9-15)

Now Paul turns his attention to the women. That he shares the same kind

of concern for the women as he does for the men can be ascertained from his use of the adverb “also” (literally, “in the same way” or “likewise”) and the repetition of the phrase “I want.”

Paul gives closer focus to the women in the church than he did the men. He gives both instructions and rationale. However, both his instructions and his rationales are hard to grapple with in light of comments he made elsewhere.

Verses 9-10 address the attitude women should possess in the worship context. Paul first discusses their outward appearance. He states that women are “to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.” He is not opposed to these things in and of themselves; but rather he is opposed to their causing a distraction. The women may be more concerned about how they look than on how they worship. Also, these may distract men from worship. Paul’s goal appears to be on establishing the appropriate environment for the worship setting.

Paul does not speak in the negative alone, however. He concludes with a positive exhortation. The women were to put on what is “appropriate for women who profess to worship God.” In fact, such is apparent more when one is clothed “with good deeds.” These deeds do not lead to right relationship, but reflect the right relationship.

In verses 11 and 12, Paul then turns his attention to a woman’s posture in worship. Interpreting these verses requires caution. One is tempted to ask, “Is Paul saying what I think he is saying?”

Again, he comes at the matter from both positive and negative angles. First, Paul speaks positively. He affirms the right of a woman to learn. This was not the case even in much Jewish culture of the time. Paul granted women were privileged to learn. Of course, there are parameters he places

on this privilege. He said a woman was to learn “in quietness and full submission.” This causes the rub for many. But again, the goal is the learning.

Some have suggested that even here Paul is alluding to a problem in the church he does not make explicit. Perhaps this is a case of women abusing the new found freedom they have in Christ (as has been offered in explanation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35). Such a suggestion must be taken seriously.

The same must be considered for Paul’s comments in verse 12. Paul does not “permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”

Oh, the paper and ink that has been expended in debating this passage! Is Paul simply expressing his own practice? Is he limiting this command to the Ephesian context because of abuses of freedoms? What exactly does he prohibit? Again, perhaps the lack of education women received in those days may play a part in his directives here.

Verses 13-15 conclude the section with Paul’s reasons for such comments. He makes a chronological argument: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” But his second reason appeals to the way in which Eve erred in the Garden of Eve as opposed to Adam. Eve was deceived by the serpent.

Paul’s last comment about women (literally “woman”) being saved in childbearing could be looked upon as an encouragement, not as his relegating women to the task of motherhood. If, as some suggest, Paul is opposing a heresy that itself denigrated women, then he could be saying that being a woman (and mother) is no hindrance to salvation. Salvation is open to them as well, he says, “if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

Discussion questions

- Was the college student interpreting this passage correctly? What would you have done?
- Does Paul provide absolute instructions to women here, unaffected by culture or context?
- What worship activities does Paul address here? Who can women teach?
- How does Paul's appeal to Adam and Eve support his instructions?

