Women and Ministry in the Pastoral Letters

The Pastoral Letters evince attitudes toward women and toward the role of women in church and society that have been the focus of much discussion.

What the Pastorals Say about Women and Ministry

In general, women are to concentrate on bearing children (1 Tim. 2:15; 5:14), managing their households (1 Tim. 5:14; Titus 2:5), and being submissive to their husbands (1 Tim. 2:11; Titus 2:5). Modesty is a prime virtue for women (1 Tim. 2:9, 15); they should shun such worldly distractions as jewelry, fashionable hairstyles, and expensive clothing (1 Tim. 2:9) and cultivate a life of good works that demonstrate reverence for God (1 Tim. 2:10). Such attention is needed because young women in particular tend to become alienated from Christ by sensual desires (1 Tim. 5:11); they are also prone to becoming idle busybodies and gossips, gadding about from house to house (1 Tim. 5:13). They need to learn to be quiet and to “learn in silence with full submission” (1 Tim. 2:11). In terms of ministry, there is an office in the church for aged widows (1 Tim. 5:9–10), and some women may also serve as deacons (1 Tim. 3:11), but women should not be permitted to teach or to have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). One reason for this seems to be that women are more likely than men to be flighty or “silly” and to be confused by their desires (2 Tim. 3:6); they are, at any rate, more easily deceived than men, as has been evident ever since Eve was tricked by the serpent in the garden of Eden (1 Tim. 2:14; cf. Gen. 3:1–7; 2 Cor. 11:3; but see also Rom. 5:12–19, where Eve is not even mentioned).

Reception and Interpretation

Not surprisingly, this theme has been considered problematic by many Christians. It seems sexist and unreasonable, and much of the language employed seems unduly harsh (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:6). The restrictions also seem incompatible with the fact that Paul is elsewhere depicted as having female co-workers (e.g., Prisca/Priscilla in Acts 18:2, 18, 26; cf. Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), and as encouraging respect for women in positions of leadership (e.g., Phoebe in Rom. 16:1–2; Junia in Rom. 16:7).

A few attempts have sought to explain the situation that would give rise to these texts:

- Some think that the harsher comments are specifically directed to wealthy women, the ones who could afford gold and pearls (1 Tim. 2:9) and lives of leisure (1 Tim. 5:6, 13); these women had become targets of teachers who


- Some think that the prohibition against teaching men is directed against "unlearned teachers" (under the assumption that women in this setting were "unlearned"). See Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 101–32.

**Conclusion**

Three general views are discernible among Christian interpreters today:

1. Many interpreters believe that the comments made in the Pastoral Letters regarding women and ministry need to be considered in light of their original social context: they should be read as socially conditioned remarks for a particular venue rather than as timeless truth for every setting. See Linda L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 162–80; Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11–14 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1992).

2. Not all interpreters are convinced that such caveats apply. Churches that do not ordain women usually appeal to the Pastoral Letters (especially 1 Tim. 2:12) as justification for the restriction, and many Christians do regard the comments in these letters as indicative of divinely mandated gender roles. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995).


**Bibliography**


