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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); 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 coworkers (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 scholars argue that gnostic movements in the second century sometimes granted high visibility to female leaders; the Pastoral Letters perhaps represent a backlash against the egalitarianism of women in those heretical communities.¹
- 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 wanted them as patrons (2 Tim. 3:6–7).²

- Some suggest that the cult of the goddess Artemis, which was prominent in Ephesus (Acts 19:24–41), might account for a Christian bias in that city against women as spiritual leaders.³
- Some think the prohibition against teaching men is directed against “unlearned teachers” (under the assumption that women in this setting were “unlearned”).⁴

Conclusion

Three general views are discernible among Christian interpreters today:

- Many interpreters believe 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.⁵
- 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.⁶

- Some Christians simply reject this teaching of the letters outright, questioning whether teaching that denigrates women should be regarded as the revealed or inspired word of God.

1. See Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Dennis R. McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).
2. See Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 450.
3. See Sharon Hodgkin Gritz, *Paul, Women Teachers, and the Mother Goddess at Ephesus: A Study of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 in Light of the Religious and Cultural Milieu of the First Century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991).
4. See Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 101–32.
5. 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).
6. 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).
7. See Linda M. Maloney, *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2, *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 361; Frances Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 145–47.

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