

# SHAPE

your gifts for God's good purposes



PART SEVEN

## THE WHOLE CHURCH Pt. 1

PAUL'S VIEW ON WOMEN IN CHRIST'S MINISTRY





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### *Paul's View on Women in Christ's Ministry*

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#### 1 Timothy 2:11-15

Our SHAPE series has been a time to focus on how God gifts us for joining his work. But we might wonder if the spiritual gifts come in “pink and blue” – if they are limited in their application among men and women. This two-part series will explore why our practice at Summit Drive has been to equip and empower the whole church – men and women – for all areas of leadership and teaching. To do that we'll focus on a key text – 1 Timothy 2:11-15 – that is often seen to limit women from certain roles in church. What does Paul intend this text to mean and how is it to function today?

#### I. Culture and Scripture

We need to come to Scripture with a deep commitment to listening to what God is saying through the text, understanding that we will need to do some hard work to hear it in context. We also come with a deep commitment not only to “understand” the text, but to “stand under” the text, to submit to the conclusions of what God is saying to us through it, wherever it leads.

We do need to examine the cultures that have influenced how we think – be those secular cultures, or church cultures, or some interesting mix of both – and then, as humbly as possible, ask God to help us look at these questions without being driven to the conclusions that simply confirm our biases.

#### II. Paul and Women

We, first, have to consider Paul's thinking on women and ministry in his other writings.

- **He follows the logic of what Jesus does.** Jesus steps over all kinds of social-religious-political boundaries to show the dignity and worth of women in a culture that saw them as subordinate to men. It was a group of women who were the first witnesses to the resurrected Jesus. And Jesus sends these women to announce the good news to his male disciples that he had been raised from the dead. God, in his sovereignty, could have arranged it otherwise, but didn't.
- **Paul acknowledges many women as his “co-workers in the Gospel,”** using the exact same language as he does of his male co-workers. (Compare how Pricilla, Euodia, and Syntyche (Rom 16:3; Phil 4:3) are called Paul's “co-workers” – *synergos* – in ministry, and the same word group is used to describe the work of prominent male Christian leaders in the Pauline circle; Rom 16:9,21; 1 Cor 16:15-16; 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25; Col 4:11; 1 Thess 3:2; Philem. 1, 14).
- **Paul commends Phoebe, the letter carrier of Romans:** “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a -way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.”

- Romans 16:1-2

- The “letter carrier” in the ancient world is also the person who would be responsible to read the letter in public, and then to explain any areas that may have needed clarity – since they were the one who has come from the author and understand the meaning of the text.
- Phoebe – a woman – was quite possibly the first person to publicly read Paul’s letter to the Romans and explain what it meant to the gathered Christian community.
- **Paul commends Junia, a female apostle.** “Greet Andronicus and Junia [likely a husband-and-wife team], my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” – Romans 16:6-7
  - Junia is a female. She and Andronicus are said to be “outstanding among the apostles.” I know, there are translations that have tried to downplay what the best translation of the text actually says because it seems shocking – “like this just can’t be – a female apostle?” That’s a significant, church-planting, leadership role.
- **Paul sees the prophetic gift as having an important teaching function within the gathered community.** Prophecy often including teaching or instruction.
  - In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul gives instructions to women about covering their heads when they pray and prophesy in a church setting. And that would be a church setting where men are present (see also Anna in Luke 2; in Acts 21 we read of four daughters of Philip the evangelist, “who prophesied”).

In the most honest estimation, Paul names women in significant ministries in the church.

### III. The Meaning of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Context

#### A. Historical Context

##### What Kind of Literature?

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope. 2 To Timothy my true son in the faith.” – 1 Timothy 1:1-2

This is a personal letter between Paul and Timothy. It was written to deal with real issues that Timothy was facing on the ground at that moment. It’s not a “manual for church life”, though it does have enduring implications for us today.

##### What’s the Purpose of the Letter?

“As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer 4 or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God’s work—which is by faith.”

– 1 Timothy 1:3-4

Paul writes this to stop false teaching that is spreading in the church. He’s also concerned that the church “advance God’s work.”

In 1 Timothy 4:3, Paul says that false teachers “forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods...” There suggests no “procreation” going on – no pregnancies, and no “childbearing.” And Paul says – “no way” to that idea. And this shows up in Paul’s instructions – why he brings in the Creation story as he gives his instructions.

#### B. Canonical Context

We need to look at the larger **Canonical Context** – the broader story of the Bible as it forms the background for dealing with the false teaching in that city. In Genesis, we see how God creates humanity, male and female, in his own image for a shared, priestly ministry.

1. God says the first word of something that is “not good” in the story so far: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper [Hebrew – *ezer*] suitable for him.” – Genesis 2:18

A “helper” – or *ezer* in Hebrew – was not the equivalent to a “subordinate” – or an assistant. It is used 20 times in the Old Testament – in 17 of those, the referent is God – “God is our *ezer*”; our “help”. And in none of the references does *ezer* denote subordinate. The man now has one who would be his equal and suitable partner. She would be “one flesh” with him, not an underling.

Genesis 2 offers no articulation of gender roles....[T]his text is concerned with human roles, not gender roles. Man and woman serve together.” – John Walton, NIV *Application Commentary, Genesis*

2. The man receives a direct command from God not to eat of the fruit of the tree in Genesis 2.
3. But the woman has not been adequately informed about this command. When tempted, she gets certain details wrong.

This event in Genesis 3 is often call “the Fall”, and it is accompanied by a series of “curses,” these are consequences of the disobedience of the humans. Here’s one that is particularly important to note:

To the woman God says, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” – Genesis 3:16

John Walton persuasively argues that there is no hint of “subordination” of women in Genesis 2, and so this line “he will rule over you” is not a “reaffirmation” of something that is not there.

Scholar David Atkinson says of this statement: “he will rule over you” is “not a divine *prescription* of what should be, but a *description* in the fallen world of what will be.” – David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11*

In this new, fallen situation, this “rule” by the husband is not a God-given role, not a prescription, but a *description* of how the husband, the biologically/physically stronger one, will often misuse his strength.

The rest of the story of the Bible, the redemptive work of Jesus, aims to restore the harmony that was lost at the fall – between us and God, and our relationships with each other, including the relationship between men and women.

There is false teaching and “godless myths and old wives’ tales” circulating in the Christian community, which brings us back to Paul’s main concern in this letter. And he doesn’t deviate from this purpose for a moment.

He says Timothy must do several things to put a stop to it.

### C. Literary Context

Paul is still dealing with false teaching and situating God’s people for their missional endeavours – and it seems dubious to suggest the three instructions are “Instructions for Worship” as the NIV editors have included for the heading. Paul’s logic follows this path leading to our main passage:

1. Paul addresses everyone in the Church community – to pray for everyone.
2. He specifically instructs men to pray without anger.
3. He specifically instructs women to dress with modesty, decency, and propriety – which also hints at the issues.

Paul mentions how women are “to dress modestly, with decency and propriety...” (2:9a). There are several factors that link this to the false teaching of the city. Summarizing the scholarship of Bruce Winter, Michael Bird concludes:

“[T]here was a sexual revolution taking place in the first century, and many well-to-do women of the upper classes had taken to acting promiscuously. These “new Roman wives” dressed in such a way as to indicate that they were sexually available.”

“The advent of the “new Roman women” in cities like Ephesus meant that some females of the upper echelons of society were determined to remain unencumbered by children [through abstinence or abortion], they aspired for the sexual freedoms of [non-Christian] men, they threw off apparel symbolizing modesty and chastity, and they were brazenly outspoken in public forums.” – Michael Bird, *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts*

As scholar Cynthia Long Westfall puts it, the false teachers in Ephesus taught the women “to avoid marriage and having children and encouraged them in immodest and ostentation behaviour in dress and lifestyle.” – Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender*

The next step in Paul’s approach leads, well, to our main text today: to put a stop to this kind of brazen behaviour and the spread of false teaching, myths, and endless genealogies by addressing the concern about women and how they are being deceived and spreading deception.

## D. Grammatical/Linguistic Analysis

### 1. Shift to the Singular

So, first, there is a shift from the plural “women” in verse 10 to the singular “a woman” or perhaps more likely “a wife.”

“A woman [singular, *gune*, “woman” or “wife”]...”

The same happens for “man” or “husband.” So, why not just stick with the plural from the previous verses? If the referent was “all women” or “all men” – why wouldn’t Paul just say, “I do not permit *women*, plural, to teach?”

That’s another signal that this is not likely addressing a worship gathering, or “all women” in general, as a blanket, universal command. Paul is very likely encouraging husbands to help instruct their wives – who would not have had the same access to learning up to this point – to avoid the way Eve was deceived in the Genesis narrative, and wives/women were being deceived in Ephesus.

### 2. Dealing with Deception – the Command to Learn

The only other place in the New Testament to mention Eve, *like at all*, is another context of her being deceived, and his concerned about false teaching for the whole church:

“But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”  
– 2 Corinthians 11:3

There, Paul is using the story of Eve’s deception as an analogy of how the whole church is liable to be deceived, not specifically about women.

The emphasis in both places is on how Eve was deceived. Led into un-truths. And that’s what’s happening in Ephesus among the women. What’s the antidote? For husbands – who would have access to education that the women did not – to teach their wives and help them learn the faith; the thing that Adam fails to properly do, and that leads to Eve being deceived.

“The wife/woman [singular]...should **learn** [imperative mood] in quietness and full submission.”

The fact that Paul needs to mention it indicates that the kind of posture women were typically taking may be influenced by the posture of the “new Roman women” we mentioned: one that is not quiet and ready to learn, but abrasive and even overturning the cultural ideals of the time, which would bring shaming and embarrassment on Christian husbands in both the church and society.

### 3. Prohibiting Teaching

This brings us to the main verse that has led to a blanket prohibition on women teaching or having authority.

**12** I do not permit a woman [or “wife”, singular] to teach or to assume authority [*authentain*, “control”, “dominate”, “violently take charge/power”] over a man [*andros* “man” or “husband”, singular]; she must be quiet [*hysukia*, “still”, “restful”].

In 1 Corinthians 14 there are women who are disruptive in the church setting, and Paul commands them to be silent and if they have questions, to ask their husbands at home. In this personal letter, Paul shares how he has dealt with a similar situation. That makes best sense of why he personalizes his own practice in this word to Timothy. “I do not permit...”

- If Paul had intended to offer a blanket prohibition on women teaching in a church setting, we might expect a command/imperative mood: “Women must not teach.” But we don’t get that.
- If Paul wanted a blanket prohibition on women teaching, the least likely place to do it would be in a personal letter like this. We would expect to find a prohibition in the book of Romans – a public letter, written to a whole church, where he is laying down a great deal of “practical theology” about gifting.
- So, why are they not to teach? Because there is a spread of false teaching, particularly among women/wives. They need to learn first.

#### 4. The Meaning of “*authentein*”

The New Testament has a few words for “authority” – about proper, God-given authority. The most common that Paul uses, by far, is *exousia*.

But *authentein* is only used one time in the New Testament, right here (this is called a *hapax legomena* in Biblical studies). Which means we must look outside the New Testament to see how it’s used.

*Authenein* often means to dominate, control, or to take or seize authority. It can refer to murder, violence, sometimes violence against oneself. In the few cases that it is used in a positive sense, the object of the verb is not another person, but a situation that requires strong, decisive action.

Let’s look at some older translations, that predate some of the modern debates translated this word:

##### Early Church

Old Latin (2-4th C): “Neither to dominate a man.”

Vulgate (4-5th C): “neither to domineer over a man.”

Coptic Sahidic (3rd C): “not to be lord over him.”

##### Reformation Era

Wycliff Bible (1384) “...neither to have lordship on the husband.”

King James Version (1611): “nor to usurp authority over the man.”

#### Modern translations and other languages

Spanish UBS (1966): “ni tampoco dominar al hombre” (“nor to dominate the man.”)

Jerusalem Bible in French (1974): “ni de faire la loi” (“neither to lay down the law for the man”)

International Standard Version (2014): “I am not allowing a woman to instigate conflict toward a man.”

Common English Bible (2011): “...or to control her husband.”

Essentially, what Paul is talking about here isn’t shorthand for the kind of loving, supportive authority of a church leader. No pastor, Christian leader, or follower of Jesus of any sort, is ever to exercise *authentien* over another person. But that’s what some wives were doing to their husbands. And it needed to stop.

**So, what does Paul mean in this text?** If he meant positive, pastoral authority, he would use the same word he does everywhere else – *exousia*. This is not about that.

#### 5. Adam and Eve as the analogy for correcting the deception.

In a similar way to how Paul uses the analogy of Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3, he will go to the true creation story as an analogy for addressing deception.

“For Adam was formed first, and then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women [actually, not “women” plural as the NIV has it. But “She...” the “wife” or the “women”] will be saved [“delivered” or “protected”] through childbearing [or childbirth] – if they [plural] continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.” – 1 Timothy 2:15

Paul is *still* dealing with false teaching and how to correct it. And the analogy of Adam and Eve works to address that. See, we know from Acts 19 that in the city of Ephesus, Artemis was one of the false gods who was worshipped. She was seen as the protector of women, especially those in childbirth. One of Artemis’ titles was even “savior”.

There is a “hymn to Artemis” that reads:

“The cities of men I [Artemis] will visit only when women vexed by the sharp pangs of childbirth call me to their aid. Even in the hour when I was born, the *Moirai* [Fates] ordained that I should be their helper.” – Hymns 3 to Artemis, *Loeb Classics Library*

In this Hymn, Artemis is said to be the “helper” in this painful, dangerous moment of childbirth. She says women are to “call to me.” That’s an idolatrous, dangerous false teaching. It’s likely that there was a “syncretism” – a blending of the Christian faith, and this pagan idolatry going on.

What should a Christian women do in childbirth? Call to Artemis? Never! The husband and wife together need to order their home – and thus the *learning* command for the wife – to continue in faith, love, and holiness. They need to centre their lives on the Giver of all Life.

The wife/woman must away any of that deceptive false teaching. For the condition of “being saved” in the sense of being accepted by God, well, that does require continued faith in Jesus – and that means an ordering their lives according to his love and holiness.

So leading Biblical scholar, Michael Bird, summarizes the passage helpfully:

“Paul does not want women dominating by propounding false doctrine in the Ephesian house churches. Paul is writing to a situation where certain well-to-do women, riding the cultural wave of feminine liberation, are trying to assume aggressively the mantle of leadership before they have properly learned the apostolic faith, and while they have come under the influence of false teachers who are rewriting the creation story to suit the inclinations of the new Roman women. Paul won’t stand for it.”

“Paul wants women to learn and to avoid being deceived precisely because they are vital to the corporate teaching ministry of the churches.”

– Michael Bird

### Take home:

1. The gifts are to be used “in love” and “love is patient.” This means, though we may not quite know what to think about all of this – it might all be new – we can be very patient with each other if we have disagreements.
2. If you’re a female and you sense gifting in areas or a kind of calling you didn’t think were open to you, well perhaps those gifts, that call, really are from God? I really don’t see any indication that spiritual gifting comes in pink and blue.
3. I know that some of you will still have some serious objections. Like, well, what about things like “eldership” – or the Lead Pastor role – are you saying that’s open to women too? Doesn’t the very next text – 1 Timothy 3 – suggest it’s not? Or, what about the home? Isn’t there still “headship” in a home? Does this change that? Those are great questions that we’ll dip into some of that next week – and as we study Ephesians over the next few months. So, again, patience will be key.
4. Our aim as a community is to order our lives under the loving leadership of Jesus the King. All Christian leadership, teaching, and ministry are to follow the same path that Jesus leads us on – one of “going down”, or taking the posture of a servant, to seek the well-being of those around us. Whatever we mean by “authority” in the life of the church, it must look like washing the feet of others. And all of us can offer that to everyone else. May it be so for us.

## LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION



### Open up

Why do you think that the topic of women in church ministry generates such passionate, and sometimes hostile, engagement – from people on many sides of the debate?

### Dig In

1. In the message, we talked about how the question of women's roles in ministry are very important – they shape the way a woman can or cannot function in the local church. So, this is not just an 'issue'; it is deeply personal for women who feel gifted and called by God. Yet, we also saw that this is not a 'core' issue – on the level of the divinity of Jesus. In your view, why is it important that the topic of women's roles in ministry is not treated as a "core" issue – one where we could say, "If you don't agree with me, you must not be a believer, or at least, we cannot be in fellowship or serve together?"

2. Read **Ephesians 4:1-6**. How might hearing and heeding Paul's instructions here help us as a community as we think about this very personal, sometimes divisive topic? How do you think those who have disagreements about this question ought to treat one another? Why?

3. As we look at the text of 1 Timothy 2, we looked at an approach that argued how Paul was dealing with specific issues for a particular moment in time. This reading recognizes that Paul really meant what he said to Timothy, and yet it doesn't conflict with the many positive assessments Paul makes about other women serving in the churches.

- a. Was there anything new or helpful for you in the message?
- b. How might hearing this approach to the text help you to be supportive of women in ministry – such as praying for them and offering encouragement – even if you disagree with this reading, or are at least unsure of your own stance?

### Prayer

Take time to thank God that he created humanity – both male and female – as his image, giving us all equal dignity and value. Take time to pray that our community would be deeply committed to the truth of what God's word teaches, and that even in cases where there may be differing convictions, that we would be full of love and generosity as we support each other in our various gifts and call.



### Some additional resources:

Short, popular level works:

Michael Bird, *Bourgeois Babes, Bossy Wives, and Bobby Haircuts: A Case for Gender Equality in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012)

Elita Friesen and Chris Price, *The Whole Church: Women, Leadership, The Church and Why it All Matters* (Canadian Church Leaders Network, 2021)

Academic works:

Bruce W. Winter, "The 'New' Roman Wife and 1 Timothy 2:9-15: the Search for a Sitz Im Leben", *Tyndale Bulletin* 51.2 (2000).

Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women In Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016)

Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, with Christa L. McKirland (eds.) *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural and Practical Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: IVP Academic, 2021)

### Objection: Isn't the reference about Adam and Eve about "creational intent"?

Some people may think that Paul's logic goes like this: "See, women can't be teachers because women can't be trusted. They're just too gullible. It was Eve who was deceived, not Adam, that's the reason they can't be teachers in the church." That sounds like Aristotle, not Paul. Or any Biblical author for that matter. (For we have judges like Deborah (Judges 4-5) and Athaliah (2 Kings 11:3), Miriam (Exodus 2; 15) and Anna (Luke 2) and Pricilla (Acts 18) and Phoebe (Romans 16) and Mary (John 20) and Junia (Romans 16) who are recognized as wise and godly women of faith).

The more common logic is this: "It mentions Adam being formed first, then Eve. This means God's design has always been that men are to be in charge and the teachers. Look what happens when men don't take on that God given role. Eve was deceived. Therefore, the fact that Paul does not permit "a woman to teach or have authority over a man," is linked to a creation ordinance. A God given design."

This is then linked to teaching or authority, assuming Paul means "authority" in a positive sense and applied in a church setting.

There are parts of that which are true. The text clearly says women need to learn – it's the only command. But the other piece is a serious leap in logic; an assumption that doesn't account well for the rest of the text, or how Paul is likely using the creation story.

The assumption is that by simply mentioning Adam and Eve, especially that "Adam was born first", we are to simply import a set of assumptions about Genesis 2, and women somehow being in a subordinate position.

Here's why I don't think that's what's happening.

First, every reference to creation from Paul is not a transcendent norm. For example, Paul appeals to creation when he makes an argument about women veiling in 1 Corinthians 11, but "all scholars who have done a basic course in hermeneutics acknowledge that the issue of head coverings is culturally restricted to the Greco-Roman environment of Corinth" (Michael Bird).

More, when Paul cites Eve's deception in 2 Corinthians 11, he applies it to a specific context among that church and uses it as an analogy. So, it is a false assumption to suppose that every reference Paul makes to the Genesis narrative is offering a transcendent universal. We must take each text on its own merit, and decide what is meant based on context, and the whole body of Paul's thought. When we do that, it seems Paul's argument is specifically aimed at dealing with an issue in that church at that moment.

So, second, the context of Paul's moment, with intent of what he is doing – trying to stem the tide of false teaching – and the grammar of this section, suggest that he's using the Adam and Eve analogy with specific reference to *deception* that needs to stop rather than making a claim that God has ordained only men to teach.

Last, the universal application view doesn't match up with the positive things Paul says of women in ministry in other places. Those would be real inconsistencies.