

## A proposed reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15, and how this interpretation speaks to issues of gender relationships and female leadership

Jillian Carole Gorven

### Abstract

This paper proposes a reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 which holds to traditional principles of gender distinctiveness, while suggesting nuances of insight and application relevant to issues of female leadership: *Women should be free to learn about God. They should do so with a quiet and submissive spirit. Women shouldn't teach or have authority over men where this is exercised in a manner that is contrary to God's design for men and women's relationships and roles, as seen in creation and the Fall. Finally, women who persevere in honouring the God-ordained feminine role of bearing and nurturing children with godliness, will be working out their salvation as they partner with God to redeem the consequences of the Fall.* The place of gender in creation and the Fall reveals distinctions in the roles given to Adam and Eve. Paul exhorts women to honour these distinctions, not in terms of absolute behavioural restrictions, but rather with regard to principles of relative gender identity. The issue of how we apply Paul's broad principles about gender to the complexities of 21<sup>st</sup> century society is addressed by Paul's reference to the church as God's household and his teaching in chapter five of the same letter.

### Keywords

Creation order gender distinctiveness, relative gender behaviour and roles, feminine role in childbearing, leadership in the household of God, transformed hearts seeking God's purposes in creation

### About the Author<sup>1</sup>

Jillian Carole Gorven  
*BTh Hons, SATS; B.Soc.Sc, UND; Psych. Hons, Wits*  
 Jillian has worked at SATS since February 2016. Currently she facilitates undergraduate courses. She is an associate member of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa.

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Here Paul teaches that godly behaviour in God's household or family, should honour the same relative distinctions of age and gender as played out in human families, made up of fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers. This is shown to be significant for the issue of female leadership. As fathers in human families are the most appropriate person to carry ultimate responsibility for family decisions and discipline, so it is fathers/mature men in God's family who are most appropriate to fill eldership roles. As this is a heart principle however, where godly men are absent, women can legitimately take this role.

## 1. Introduction

In 2010 Alan Johnson compiled twenty-one testimonies from prominent evangelicals about how they have changed from a traditional view about male leadership in churches to accepting female leadership as biblical.

Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:11–15 bring us face to face with the theological differences evidenced in this debate about God's will for Christian women. Through examining this and other key texts, with reference to the large body of scholarship on this topic, I will argue that the traditional understanding of Paul's teachings on gender is still sound in broad principle, but that our context requires deeper understanding of these principles to be able to apply them in a way that addresses the deep pain of how sin manifests in gender relations.

I have found that an examination of the two broad camps on God's will for gender roles and relationships reveals that the egalitarian and complementarian views would benefit from focusing on godly attitudes based on eternal principles rather than on culturally transient and legalistic applications of these precepts.

In Matthew 5<sup>2</sup> Jesus says, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law...' (v. 17) and 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (v. 20). Jesus then goes on in verses 21 to 48 to refer to Old Testament teachings with the words 'You have heard that it was said...But I tell you...' and tells us that it is the attitude behind these teachings that counts rather than heeding just the letter of the law as the scribes and Pharisees did. Jesus calls us to more than just respectable behaviour. He demands transforming of our hearts and minds to a place where we are 'perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48).

**2** Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version translation

I believe we should trust that God's word, through his apostle Paul, teaches us the 'perfect' way to be both women and men in this 'already-not-yet' time.

I also propose that dividing sacred and secular, or even Christian home- and church-based behaviour for men and women seeking to please the Lord, is not desirable or even possible. We will end up with endless complex rules, and possibly schizophrenic distress. Instead I will argue that women and men can only live fully and freely if we are willing to submit to and celebrate the gender distinctiveness which history, reason, experience and, arguably, God's Word reveals. As Abigail Dodds (2019;location 358) says, 'God doesn't create a human as anything but a man or a woman. I was not made a human mainly, with a side of a woman... I do not, cannot, exist except as a woman.' And I believe the same is true of men created according to God's 'very good' design.

## 2. Proposed Overarching tenets of Paul's message in 1 Timothy 2:11-15

The traditional understanding of the theological message in 1 Timothy 2:11–15 has become so offensive to egalitarians, that it is generally explained away as only a teaching meant to address the specific context of first-century Ephesus. However, this logic could be applied to almost all of Paul's letters, because they were often written to address specific problems in the early church. This logic is also problematic because it either necessitates a denial of Scripture's authority, as happens in the case of critical feminists, or it leads to very complex and often highly speculative exegesis as in the case of evangelical feminists (House 1979:45–9). Yes, it is sensible to avoid applying dress codes or hairstyle mores from two thousand years ago. But is it sensible to believe that God's creation of gender has a different intent according to what point in history one finds oneself? Keener (2012:location 2325–2326) represents many egalitarians who argue that gender relations are like slavery, which had a necessary lifetime. However, slavery unlike gender was never part of God's created order. Rather, I propose that Christians should accept the reality of gender in creation and earnestly strive to end the far-too-long lifespan of the perversion of God-ordained gender relations.

On the other hand, the complementarian position has problems of its own. In wanting to create definitive boundaries about the types of behaviour that are within God's will for women, traditionalists get tripped up when applying the significance of Paul's theology to

the myriad leadership structures in ecclesial and secular settings. They also go to great lengths to explain away female leaders in Scripture. For example, how it was that ‘Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel’ with God’s obvious consent (Judg 4:4). I believe that these complications arise when the letter rather than the spirit of Paul’s teaching becomes the focus.

After scrutinizing a number of possible understandings and interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 (Celoria 2013; Guthrie 2007:1294–1304; Larson 2000:167–177; Long Westfall 2016:279–312; Moss 1994; Oden 1989:92–102; Schreiner 2005:85–120; Stott 1996:72–88; Towner 1994) and reading scholarship across the egalitarian complementarian spectrum, the following is my understanding of what it was Paul was trying to say about Christian women in this passage.

I agree with Gorman (2004:551) that Paul clearly states his main purpose in writing his first letter to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:14–15... ‘I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God’. Cynthia Long Westfall (2016:298–303) bases much of her egalitarian interpretation of this passage on the premise that Paul’s main purpose is to oppose false teaching in the very specific context of 1<sup>st</sup> century Ephesus, and that he therefore overstates the need for relative behaviour of women and men. However, I propose that the specificity of Paul saying, I am writing so that you may know *how one ought to behave*, asserts positive teaching of truth, rather than an over-correction of error which is only relevant to a specific context.

This positive teaching of the truth is addressed specifically to women in 1 Timothy 2:9–15. Regarding this passage there is little disagreement about Paul’s teaching that Christian women should dress modestly (v. 9) and do good works (v. 10). However, verses 11–14, where Paul talks about women’s behaviour in relation to men, elicit much controversy. And verse 15, which addresses childbearing, is notoriously controversial.

My understanding of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 falls somewhere between the traditional / complementarian / historic and progressive / egalitarian / feminist positions. I believe in the historic underlying principle that God created us with gender as a defining part of our identity, and consequently of our relationships and roles.

Moreover, I believe that Paul as a faithful student of the Torah, would have held to this principle of gender. However, I share the

feminist concern with how society, even Christian society, has applied this principle.

Yet with the new, soft, Spirit-filled hearts that Jesus won for us and deeper understanding of God's original purposes for gender, I propose that Christians can live out these purposes in a better way than either the Israelites under the Law or historical Christian society. Flowing from this position, I propose that the overarching message from Paul in 1 Timothy 2:11–15 can be best summarised as follows:

*Women should be free to learn about God. They should do so with a quiet and submissive spirit. Women shouldn't teach or have authority over men where this is exercised in a manner that is contrary to God's design for men and women's relationships and roles, as seen in creation and the Fall. Finally, women who persevere in honouring the God ordained feminine role of bearing and nurturing children with godliness, will be working out their salvation as they partner with God to redeem the consequences of the Fall.*

This proposed interpretation of Paul's theology will be explained in more detail through an examination of possible strengths and weaknesses.

### **3. Proposed strengths of this interpretation of Paul's message**

There are just two categories of strengths proposed for this interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15: its offer of liberation and its agreement with other Scripture. I assert that they are both important. The discussion around true liberation is broad and speculative in nature, while the argument that this interpretation agrees with other Scripture will detail four significant ways it aligns with various biblical teachings about gender relationships.

#### **3.1. The offer of true liberation**

I believe it is ironically the very motive for doubting Paul's gender theology which is its greatest strength. While Christian feminists struggle against what they perceive to be his oppressive, even misogynist approach, I propose that Paul offers women (and men) freedom in the truest sense of the word. Not unbounded freedom which ends up being disappointingly governed by human desires and fears; but rather a freedom of godly dimensions where we are not dependent on our wishes but God's (Rom 6:22).

I believe that once we submit to the identities, relationships and roles which God has ordained, we are free to be fully ourselves,

fully in harmony with others and with our Creator. Psalm 119:45 says this in a nutshell, 'I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts' (NIV).

Since Jesus and the Holy Spirit enabled God's law to be written onto our hearts and minds (Jer 31:33; Heb 10:16), submitting to these distinctions of gender flows best from transformed hearts and minds rather than from detailed rules determined by ourselves at a point in history. It is perhaps because the traditional reading of 1 Timothy 2 has focused too intently on the detail of correct behaviour, that the liberation of godly attitudes has been lost, and that this Pharisee-type burden has encouraged rebellion. Perhaps Satan has again succeeded in overstating God's restrictions as a way of tempting human rebellion, as he did in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:1b).

It is also essential to recognize the devastating effect of patriarchal abuses on women's experience of the freedoms we should have in Christ. And to recognize that feminism, womanism and egalitarianism are generally responses to this painful history and are seeking a better way forward for gender relations. Tragically the church has been slow to recognize the sin of men ruling over women in ungodly ways despite God's warning after the Fall. In many instances Christian leaders have even encouraged this oppression, denying women the fullness of their equal inheritance in Christ (Gal 3:28), as Spirit-filled servants of God. The church has also been slow to recognize the priesthood of all believers and the giving of the Great Commission to all Christ followers, regardless of gender. So, this proposed reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 seeks to restore these truths to a passage that has been used alternatively to limit true freedom in Christ, or more recently to deny that this freedom can only be found within God's created order.

The joy of a bull's-eye life, neither to the left or right of the target, can only be found in God's Word; and so, we will now consider how my proposed reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 correlates with other biblical texts.

### **3.2. Agreement with other Scripture**

I will discuss this proposed strength with respect to four controversial aspects of a complementarian reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15: the principle of relative rather than unilateral gender behaviour; quietness as a desirable trait in women; creation order and design as the foundation of gender distinctive roles and relationships; and women's role as mothers.

### ***3.2.1 The principle of relative rather than unilateral gender behaviour***

Paul's teaching in verses 11 and 12 for women to have a submissive attitude resounds in scriptures using identical and very similar vocabulary such as: 'submissive' (Titus 2:5), 'submit' (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18), 'submitting' (1 Pet 3:5) and 'subject to' (1 Pet 3:1). All these scriptures refer to wives in relation to their own husbands. Ephesians 5:23 and especially 1 Corinthians 11:1–16, talk about the situation from the man's point of view, with him being the 'head' of his wife. Although the meaning of the word head has been much debated, Grudem has defended his original comprehensive lexical study, which indicates the implication of 'head' is authority, rather than origin or source (2006:425–468). However, I would argue that even if 'head' does imply fountainhead or source, the teaching of relative authority between husband and wife is implicit, as Paul compares this relationship to Christ and the Church, two entities who necessarily have relative rather than equal authority (Eph 5:22–24).

Returning to 1 Timothy 2, in verse 11 Paul says, 'Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness'. Although this may point to a heart that is submissive to God's teaching, this is not explicit; and so I understand that it points to a more general spirit of submission. The thrust of the passage is not focused on general obedience to God's Word, but rather appropriate behaviour that is specific to women.

In verse 12 Paul goes on to say, 'I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet'. Here, the teaching of submission of a wife to her own husband, has often been extended to understand this passage to be exhorting women to submit to men in general. I would argue that this understanding is not accurate. I propose that here, very significantly, the teaching is different to teachings about what women should do with respect to their husbands. Rather, this teaching is about what women shouldn't do with respect to men in general. I believe this nuance is very important to the debate on women's leadership.

On a number of occasions the instruction for a wife to submit to her husband is emphasized as being specific only to one man, that is, her 'own husband' (1 Pet 3:1; Eph 5:2; Titus 2:5). And here in 1 Timothy 2:12 the instruction is not to submit, but rather, not to be in authority over. It is perhaps not recognizing this subtle difference between appropriate gender behaviour within marriage and appropriate gender behaviour in general company, which has made this teaching of Paul's so problematic and open to abuse.

On the other hand, Long Westfall argues that the switch from plural to singular in verse 12 indicates that this instruction about relative authority is only relevant to the relationship between a wife and her husband (2016:289). However, this entire letter is focused on behaviour in God's household, as are the immediately preceding verses. Could the switch to singular not be simply a literary device used for emphasis? I imagine a schoolteacher saying, 'Girls, you must not pinch the boys. No girl may touch a boy in my classroom'.

A closer look at the original Greek of verse 12 will help to understand the nature of this authority that women shouldn't exercise with respect to men. The Greek word '*authentēo*' generally translated as 'exercise authority over' is a hapex legomena. Baldwin (2005:51) concludes that a study of over eighty usages of this word in ancient writings shows '*authentēo*' to have a neutral meaning of authority. However, he gives one of the possible specific meanings as 'to dominate', which would be a negative rather than neutral way of exercising authority. Davis (2009:5) says there are four or five instances of extra-biblical use around the time of Paul that gave this word a negative connotation, meaning to 'perpetuate a crime' or even 'murder'. He also names five 'pre-modern' (2<sup>nd</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century), and significantly prefeminist, versions of the bible which translate '*authentēo*' as undesirable authority. Long Westfall (2016:294) presents a detailed and convincing argument for '*authentēo*' to mean illegitimate, unauthorized and therefore inappropriate authority. However, this negative meaning is understood by her to imply that women may have positive authority over men, such as caring eldership. I partly sympathise with this interpretation but propose that, although many types of female authority are legitimate in God's eyes, it is the role-type of elder or overseer, as defined by Paul in 1 Timothy 3, which is inappropriate for women to exercise over men, even when exercised in a godly manner.

Paul immediately points to the reasons for this inappropriateness of women taking 'ultimate' authority from men (verses 13–14), by referring to God's establishment of a benevolent hierarchy through the primogeniture of a male human at creation. It can seem arbitrary to differentiate identity through mere chronology of creation. However, when the detail of the creation account of Genesis 2 is in view, this purposeful ordering of God's becomes clearer. Several responsibilities were given to Adam before Eve was created: he was given work (v. 15); he was given a command from God with a consequence should he disobey (vv. 16–17); and he was allowed to name the animals (vv. 19b–20a). After these events



it is recorded that Eve was made from Adam. Thus, Adam's primogeniture is shown to result in his being given much responsibility before Eve is created. This distinctive male responsibility is further evidenced by the fact that after the Fall, although Eve had taken the first bite of sin, it was Adam that God called to for first account. It is also significant that this godly ordering is disregarded by the crafty snake, Eve, and Adam in the act of original sin, when Satan bypasses Adam to tempt Eve, and they respond positively. So, I argue that in verse 12 Paul is pointing to God's will for men and women to act with regard to their relative differences to the opposite gender. Not doing so plays into the deception of Satan and the consequent painful results of sin.

As this section is examining correspondence between my reading of relative gender roles in 1 Timothy and other biblical teaching, I would like to propose that denying concepts of headship and submission in terms of gender, risks undermining these concepts within other topics addressed by Scripture. The words 'head' and 'submission' are often oversimplified into monolithic ideas of oppression and victimhood. Regarding the issue of gender relations this is understandable, given the terrible abuses of male power throughout history. Yet to swing the pendulum of sin to the other extreme of denying the reality of God's design, will only substitute one misery for another. Immediately after the Fall God warns Eve of the pain of a man ruling over her **and** of the sin of her desire to take possession of him (Gen 3:16b).

To conclude, I propose that Paul's address to women in 1 Timothy harmonises with other biblical texts which exhort women to behave in a way that considers rather than disregards gender distinctions. However, this comparison highlights the nuance in the guidance given regarding marital relationships versus more general gendered relationships.

The restriction on how women relate to men in general is not about submitting to all men as a wife to her husband, but about not being disrespectful of the distinction between men and women's roles. That is, having a balanced attitude that is submissive to God's will for the genders he created, without losing sight of men and women being equally valuable brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **3.2.2 Quietness as a desirable trait in women**

Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12 that a woman 'is to remain quiet' can appear to contradict his teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:5 when

he gives guidance as to how women should pray and prophesy. However, when a literal interpretation of Paul's teaching on women being silent in church obviously contradicts passages confirming women prophesying, we need to seek further insight (Grudem 1987:11–23). Oden (1989:96–97) and Larson (2000:12) say the English translation of *'hesuchia'* as 'silence' or even 'to remain quiet' is too harsh, and that the Greek is better understood as the virtue of quietness. I propose that verse 11, 'Let a woman learn quietly', has this same implication of a quiet disposition rather than a restriction on speaking per se. This interpretation is supported, if we consider that at the beginning of this same chapter Paul uses the same word *'hesuchia'* when he exhorts prayer so 'that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life...' (1 Tim 2:2).

Upon an initial reading, Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35 seems even more restrictive when he says, 'As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says'.<sup>3</sup> However, I propose it is significant that the restriction on the behaviour of speaking is linked to the attitude of submission. So although it is unclear and therefore speculative as to what exactly this restriction entails, given that, as previously mentioned, Paul gives guidance about how women should pray and prophesy a few chapters before (1 Cor 11:5), it is likely that the godly attitude or state of heart is most important, because it is to this that Jesus points in Matthew 5 when he reminds us of what 'the Law also says'. I propose this is also a case of discerning 'cultural transposition', helpfully explained by John Stott (1996:78), where the ethical principle of female quietness is eternal, while the application of the undefined restriction on speaking is specific to a particular context. The way a transformed quiet feminine heart manifests itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will generally be different to the manifestation of it being 'shameful for a woman to speak in church' as Paul writes in verse 35b.

Again, it is good to remember that God's ways are not the oppressive measures Satan would have us believe, but instead are the only way to experience the fullness that true freedom allows. May all Christian women be set free to experience 'the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious' (1 Pet 3:4).

### **3.2.3 Creation order and design as the foundation of gender distinctive roles and relationships**

I have already argued for creation order underpinning gender distinctiveness. Here the focus is on how Paul's reference to

<sup>3</sup> The ESV (2008: 2213) explains that "the Law" probably refers to patterns of male leadership in the Torah, including the creation order of Genesis

creation in 1 Timothy 2:13–14 corresponds with another Scriptural teaching on gender relative to creation. Leading theologians like deSilva (2004:750) and Long Westfall (2016:294) disagree that Paul draws on creation passages to teach transcendent norms. However, it is noteworthy that when Jesus is asked about divorce, he uses a Genesis passage to underpin teaching on normative relationships between men and women. In Mark 10:5–8 Jesus refers to ‘the beginning of creation’ to teach that although the Old Testament behaviour of writing a certificate of divorce was necessary because of ‘hardness of heart’, that God’s original purposes for us were not to separate what ‘God has joined together’. That is, that as New Testament people we can realise God’s transcendent normative purposes for making us men and women, rather than merely managing our sinful hearts through legally correct behaviour. The correlation between Jesus’ and Paul’s reference to creation when teaching about gender relations, suggests that Paul’s teaching should also be seen as one concerning God’s original will, rather than one only relevant to a specific time and circumstance.

#### **3.2.4 Women’s role as mothers**

Finally in this section concerning the strength of compatibility with other Scripture, I propose that the historically difficult verse 15 of 1 Timothy 2 is rendered more coherent when it is examined in the light of other biblical teachings on women, and in this case more particularly, women’s role in childbearing. There are many complicated and varied interpretations of this verse (Moss 1994). Upon considering them, I believe it is the legalistic and scripturally unsupported understanding that woman must bear children in order to be saved which has led to convoluted attempts to explain Paul’s theological principle away. Instead, the principle again follows the lead of God’s creation design. God created women as the bearers of children and condoned what he had made as good.

Here in Timothy Paul affirms this ongoing God-given role, which he qualifies as requiring godly attitudes and behaviours in order to be a role that facilitates redemption.

There are a couple of twists in the way this verse is written: the perplexing phrase ‘saved through childbearing’, and the change in tense from singular to plural. I cannot do them justice in this paper, but would like to offer a way of unravelling each of these puzzles. Regarding ‘saved through childbearing’, I propose that as the preceding verse talks of the woman becoming a transgressor, it is likely that the word ‘saved’ is referring to the consequences of this transgression. In Genesis 3:16 shortly after the transgression

God says to the woman, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children'. The use of the word 'childbearing' also links this consequence of sin for Eve to Paul's words. So, I propose a reading that godly perseverance through the struggles of motherhood in a fallen world will be a way of women 'working out their salvation', a concept which Paul teaches to the Philippians (Phil 2:12). The ESV footnotes assert that, 'the Philippians' continued obedience is an inherent part of "working out" their salvation' (2008:2284). As a role given to the female sex at creation, childbearing must be part of God's original purpose for women; and persevering to fulfill God's purpose is obedience. I realise that within this explanation I have assumed that the word 'childbearing' is not limited to the singular act of childbirth. This will be discussed further in section 3.1. Now I would like to suggest a brief freehand proposal to unravel the second twist in this verse, that is, the puzzling switch to plural in the second line. Could it simply be Paul's way of shifting focus back to women in general after having shifted to the singular in verse 12 for emphatic effect, and then continuing in the singular as he discussed Eve?

Both testaments of Scripture bear witness to God's desire for women to focus on nurturing their children and more broadly managing their resulting 'households' (Prov 31:10–31; Titus 2:4–5). The Proverbs passage talks of the strength, dignity and joy (v. 25) that this God-given role can bring when exercised in a godly way. This contrasts the zeitgeist of our day which often assumes restriction or drudgery when it comes to traditional female roles. However, on the other hand Jesus himself demonstrates that childbearing (Luke 11:27–28; Doriani 2003:46–47) and household management (Luke 10:38–42; Doriani 2003:44–46) are not the source of a woman's primary worth or blessing. And common sense tells us that not all women bear children. Again, it is not the behaviour but the attitude that Scripture teaches.

May all Christians, whether mothers or not, find great joy and freedom in attributing great value to this God-given female role.

#### **4. A response to alleged weaknesses of this message**

My proposed interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 that women shouldn't exercise inappropriate authority over men and that the feminine role of motherhood should be prioritized, is not a politically correct one in our times. Similar complementarian interpretations have received much academic criticism over the last few decades. This section seeks to respond to five of these criticisms.

#### **4.1. A correct understanding of original context changes the traditional complementarian reading or application of this reading**

Contextual criticism of complementarian positions follows two lines of argument. First, that the peculiarity of Paul's context means his teachings are not relevant to other contexts, such as the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And second, that the traditional complementarian understanding of his message was faulty, because the original context was missed or misunderstood.

Regarding 1 Timothy 2:11-15 specifically, the historical reality of the Artemisian cult in mid-1<sup>st</sup> century Ephesus suggests a context with a zeitgeist of perverted gender relations. There is also historical evidence that false proto-gnostic and over-realised eschatological teachings were encouraging Christian women to discard their womanly roles of marriage and childbearing and assert themselves in a socially inappropriate masculine manner (Celoria 2013:21). These historical factors seem to fit with the forbidding of marriage and legalistic abstinence from certain foods that Paul refers to in 1 Timothy 4:3. However, there are counterclaims that there is no factual certainty about either the specific historical context (Baugh 2005:36–38) or the false teaching (Schreiner 2005:88–90) that Paul refers to in the introduction to this pastoral epistle (1 Tim 1:3–7; 18–20). My rationale is, however, that Paul would not teach false principles or behaviour in his efforts to correct false teaching. Thus, I propose that although it is helpful to know as much as possible about the context for the original audience in order to interpret the teaching accurately, Biblical teaching will not be against God's design because of contextual specificity.

Long Westfall (2016:308–310) supports the egalitarian reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 with two thought-provoking arguments based on numerous historical factors.

Her first argument is that Paul's reference to Adam and Eve was not to assert normative roles based on primogeniture and relative authority, but rather only to correct the specific myths and false teachings of this context. Her second argument is based on the reality of the significant physical danger of giving birth in the ancient world and the tendency in Ephesus to turn to the goddess Artemis for protection. She argues, therefore, that Paul was correcting avoidance of childbirth or the use of syncretic practices in trying to survive it, rather than teaching that women should prioritise motherhood as a godly feminine role.

I have already addressed the argument that Paul's reference to Genesis does not imply that his teaching on gender distinctiveness is normative (Section 2.2.3). Here I would like to focus on the

contextual criticism which concludes that his teaching on childbearing is also only applicable to the original audience. As previously mentioned, I propose that when Paul uses the word ‘childbearing’ he is not just talking about being kept physically safe through a single event. Instead I believe he is referring to the role of mother given to ‘the mother of all living’ (Gen 3:20) at creation. To support this interpretation, I assert that God addressing Adam and Eve separately after the Fall is very significant, because it indicates that they would be impacted in distinctive ways through the new reality of sin, and this supports the interpretation that they had been created with distinctive ongoing identities and roles. Women would be particularly vulnerable in giving birth and caring for children (Gen 3:16a); and men would be particularly vulnerable in needing to provide sustenance for their families (Gen 3:17–19a). Furthermore, it is possible that God addressed Eve about the sinful effect on gender relationships (Gen 3:16b), because pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and other mothering roles, as well as her generally smaller feminine physique, means she is more dependent, and therefore any relational sin is likely to make her the more vulnerable party (Gen 3:16b).

Complementarians also wrestle with context, as they battle to apply legalistic behavioural restrictions to our contemporary realities. This leads to attempts to restrict the teaching about appropriate behaviour for women to ecclesial settings. I believe this is problematic. Perhaps Paul’s teaching about modest dress and doing good works just a couple of verses before, or any other ‘difficult to apply outside of church’ teaching, could then be restricted to only being required at church gatherings. This artificial dividing up of appropriate church and secular behaviour is not necessary when godly principles of the heart are applied in contextually appropriate manners.

#### **4.2. Traditional readings disregard the personal nature of this letter to Timothy**

Long Westfall (2016:282–285) has emphasized this issue of context by arguing that traditional interpretations have missed the significance of 1 Timothy being a personal letter. She explains that because Paul is writing to his co-worker who shares an understanding of the false teaching in Ephesus, he doesn’t need to elaborate on the context and thus context has traditionally been missed as a consideration in exegesis of this passage. Long Westfall highlights this by contrasting Paul’s personal and problem-focused corrective teaching in 1 Timothy with the proclamatory teachings of Romans. Therefore, she argues that

these instructions to Ephesian women via Timothy are a 'highly occasional' teaching peculiar to the shared context that Paul and Timothy had as co-workers, and are not intended to be 'read primarily as theology' or taught as normative theological principles.

My response to this alleged weakness is threefold. First, Paul also writes to Timothy saying, '*All Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.' (2 Tim 3:16; italics mine). So, although the letters to Timothy are from one person to another, they have the authority to teach as they are included in the canon of 'all Scripture'. Moreover, Paul is instructing Timothy to apply this interpersonal teaching to the church (1 Tim 4:6). And then in terms of Romans' obvious proclamatory teaching being contrasted with the correction of specific errors in 1 Timothy, it may also be helpful to consider that correction of error is usually only given when a specific error has occurred, but this does not mean that because the correction is specific to the error, that the teaching is not itself also a general truth. Second, in his opening sentence of this personal letter, Paul asserts his apostolic identity and that this teaching is a 'command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus'. As discussed in the introduction, Jesus' first teaching in the Sermon on the Mount repeatedly tightened requirements of the Law in terms of godly attitudes. Why then wouldn't this command of the Lord in 1 Timothy have taught positively that men and women should now relate without respect to gender, if this was God's original design for attitudes of men and women regarding each other. Third, I believe that human history and experience suggest that the myths and false teachings in Ephesus in terms of gender roles are not unique to that context, but have persisted since the snake reversed the relative gender roles and deceived the women into taking command, and the man into following suit.

#### **4.3. Examples of women in Scripture contradict traditional readings of Paul's teaching**

Feminist scholarship uses examples of women in both the Old and New Testaments to prove that godly women can occupy all positions of authority in Christian ministry (Croft 2013:26–29). Unfortunately for them, they are trawling through many examples of women of great ministry and influence, but almost none of official leadership. This is simply because they are looking at the annals of 2000 years ago, a time when society seldom allowed for official appointments of women to public positions.

More traditional interpreters of 1 Timothy 2 also resort to complicated logic to escape some inconvenient biblical evidence

and support a moratorium on certain roles for women. But Cunningham (2000: 60) notes that a quarter of the 39 co-workers Paul mentions were women, and that 886 verses of the Bible are written by women. How, then, can denying women ministry roles and voices be supported biblically?

Furthermore, when the Old Testament unashamedly records Deborah as being one of the judges of Israel, the argument that she never asserted her authority in public comes across as very legalistic. Moreover Davis (2009:8) argues that her leadership was public in both civil and spiritual arenas and blessed by God. Richter and Wiseman (1966:627) describe a judge at this point in Israel's history as 'a leader in battle and a ruler in peace'. Thus, it is inescapable that a woman led Israel when God ordained it. This supports the view that Paul is teaching principles rather than detailed and rigid application of those principles.

#### **4.4. Genesis 3:16 and Galatians 3:28 discount gender differentiation**

Egalitarians refer to Genesis 3:16b and Galatians 3:28 as proof that God's original design for gender was one of equal authority and interchangeable roles, rather than Paul's teaching about women needing to respect male primogeniture and gender-specific roles. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, he said to the woman, 'Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you'. A common progressive interpretation of this passage is that husbands' having authority over their wives was a result of sin and not God's intended plan. Alongside this, the passage in Galatians becomes the proof text for an egalitarian view. Paul's words, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus', is interpreted as Jesus setting us free from the curse of male dominion and even gender distinctiveness.

These interpretations are theologically problematic. Alternative interpretations will now be explored in an attempt to further grapple with what Scripture says about gender, and so cast more light on 1 Timothy 2:11–15. It is most helpful to look at Galatians 3, first, and then the passage from Genesis 3.

With reference to the ESV Study Bible footnotes (2008:2249–2251) it is apparent that the key to interpreting Galatians 3:28 is succinctly described in what follows directly in verse 29, 'And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise'. Paul was explaining how God's promise to Abraham that 'I will be their God' to his and Sarah's offspring (Gen 17:8) was no longer limited to those defined as Jews by the Mosaic law



but was extended to Gentiles. Furthermore Paul explains, ‘but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian [the Mosaic Law], for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith’ (Gal 3:26; brackets mine). This helps us to understand that not only is Paul addressing the problem of some being completely outside of this promise of having God as Father, as the Gentiles were, but also the problem that within Jewish society, there was a hierarchical structure of access to God. Paul is teaching about the old divisions under Mosaic Law, which restricted access to God according to one’s position within Judaism, also being taken away by the direct access to God that faith in Jesus and the concomitant indwelling of his Spirit provide. So, Paul is trying to explain how all, no matter their previous restrictions under the Law, could now by faith in Jesus and spiritual baptism become equally sons of God, that is, heirs who could now access the glorious inheritance that God planned for us all from creation.

Thus, Galatians 3:28 is not proof that gender roles and relationships ordained by God at creation are no longer relevant, but rather that the ‘image of God’ (Gen 1:27) in both male and female be fully recognized. The curse of sin and the necessary ‘curse of the law’ that separated us all from our heavenly father, to varying degrees, is now fully resolved in Christ Jesus ‘becoming a curse for us’ (Gal 3:13).

Here it is helpful to go back to an examination of God’s description of the curse of sin to Eve in Genesis 3:16b. As previously said, feminists interpret this curse of male dominion as proving it was never God’s plan for a gender difference in roles of authority. However, a closer look at this verse will show that, in accordance with the nature of evil, it was perversion rather than the reversal of God’s will that was the result and curse of sin.

The phrase God uses to Eve, ‘Your desire shall be for your husband’ is the same phrase God uses to Cain one chapter later, ‘...sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you...’ (Gen 4:7). The role of being a husband’s companion and helper (Gen 2:18) is resisted because of a sinful desire to possess or to oppose him. Likewise, when God goes on to say, ‘and he shall rule over you’, the Greek word for ‘rule’ does not translate as the beneficent authority described by Paul’s teaching about the servant leadership of husbands to their wives being modelled after Jesus’ sacrificial relationship with the church (Eph 5:25). Rather, this ‘rule over’ speaks of the reality of wife abuse that has plagued humanity throughout the ages, again a perversion rather than reversal of God’s created order.

Thus, Genesis 3:16b does not imply that God never planned different roles for men and women, but rather that these God-ordained distinctions had been damaged by sin. It is this damage that leads to the need to re-examine how Christian men and women live out their relationship to each other. The severity of these disrupted relationships has led to the theological feminism that is performing surgery on the wrong part of the body. We shouldn't be performing plastic surgery to try and make men and women look alike, but rather open-heart surgery to restore the core of our being to God's original purpose of being fully male and female.

#### **4.5. Jesus role-models an egalitarian approach**

Finally, egalitarians will ask in response to the above arguments, why is it then that Jesus broke with convention in the way he related to women. He spoke to the Samaritan women at the well and socialized with prostitutes, demonstrating a radical break with the Jewish laws around appropriate gender relations? I would say it is exactly this behaviour of Jesus' which supports my proposed interpretation of Paul's gender theology in 1 Timothy 2. Jesus is not under the curse of sin or law. He understands his Father's original will of a harmonious relationship between men and women. He does not desire to dominate women, but rather to serve their best interests in love. Neither then is he constrained by the curse of the law which serves to contain our sin. Rather he is free to ignore the behavioural restrictions of Mosaic law in the same way that Peter and Paul came to understand that physical circumcision was no longer necessary, because circumcision of the heart was now possible, ... 'circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter' (Rom 2:29).

#### **5. Application of the proposed principles underlying 1 Timothy 2:11-15 with reference to 1 Timothy 5, and with special consideration of female leadership**

How can women apply these 1 Timothy principles of consideration for relative gender distinctiveness? In terms of women's unique role in mothering, it seems apparent that women should persevere in honouring this role with 'faith and love and holiness, with self-control'. However, how to apply the principle of relative rather than unilateral behaviour with respect to the opposite gender is less clear, especially when the question of church leadership is in view.

In terms of inter-gender relationships I have argued that the positive commands of submission and authority taught regarding marriage, do not apply in the same way to general society. Rather, here Paul gives a negative command, describing what women should not do when interacting with men in general, when he says not 'to teach or exercise authority over a man'. It is difficult to know how to apply these very general 1<sup>st</sup> century restrictions to the many different scenarios of the relationships between men and women in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. However, I believe the sufficiency of Scripture is proved when it provides simple yet comprehensive guidance within the very same letter that perplexes us so. In chapter 3 verse 15 Paul refers to the church as 'the household of God'. And then in the opening verse of chapter 5 he tells Timothy to treat an older man as 'a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters'. Therefore, I propose that Paul points to family relationships, that are determined by relative age and gender, as a model for godly mixed behaviour in general. I propose the following implication for this in terms of Christian female leadership: that in the same way women take many different roles including roles of leadership in a family, but stop short of taking authority over, and from, the father of the family; so too women in the church and broader society should refrain from leading in ways that do not respect the father-like authority of the older men in that particular church or community.

There is the complexity of what Paul meant by including the restriction of a woman not teaching a man. However, I believe that if we hold to the principle of women not exerting inappropriate authority over men, we can determine what manner of teaching Paul is referring to.

I propose it is significant that it is the ability to teach which distinguishes Paul's list of requirements for an elder, versus his list for deacons (1 Tim 3:2). Foh (1979:248) notes, 'Teaching and exercising authority are inseparable for the elder; that is, the elder has the authority to teach and to 'enforce' his teaching by means of church discipline'. Thus, where these two roles are combined, as in the case of an elder, an ultimate authority figure corresponding to the father figure in a family is in view. And so it is this role that is not appropriate for women in the 'household of God'.

To conclude this discussion on application, I would like to point to a real-life example to illustrate how I believe this proposed reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 is a matter of the heart rather than the letter of the law.

A colleague of mine leads a group of churches in South Africa and pastors a church in the Queensburgh area of KwaZulu Natal. The other day he mentioned that some of the smaller churches were struggling with various issues, one of which was leadership. The problem was that in these smaller churches most members are women and sometimes the few men there are not suitable, willing or called candidates. We agreed that in instances like these, a suitable and willing woman whom God calls should be appointed to serve as a church leader. In the same way that circumstances sometimes require a woman (or man) to be both mother and father in a family, so too in God's household. But what joy when there are two parents who embrace their God-given identities, relationships and roles.

I believe this principle of relative suitability rather than ultimate restriction applies in the biblical case of Deborah, a judge of Israel. Applying this principle of the Christian heart valuing the relative distinctiveness of gender is also helpful in negotiating the even more complex space of the marketplace (Piper 2019: audio).

My prayer is that those who have moved away from the often harmfully-applied historic views about church leadership, will find that there is a middle path between the historic and progressive views. One where we recognise and turn away from the legalistic application of an overstatement of the restrictions on women in God's household; while at the same time having soft hearts that are eager to submit to God's purposes evidenced in his creation of both sons and daughters.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has proposed that Paul wrote 1 Timothy to let his coworker in the troubled Ephesian church know 'how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church' (1 Tim 3:15). In chapter 2 verses 11–15 of this letter Paul focuses his instructions specifically on women's attitudes and behaviours in the church. He bases this teaching on the primogeniture of Adam. This appeal to God's ordering of creation seems to tighten gender restrictions in an unbearable way. However, akin to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, this tightening of the Law actually moves away from the legalistic behavioural restrictions that were necessary post-Fall and pre-Christ and moves towards the freedom of God-aligned attitudes of the heart pre-Fall and post-Christ.

In this new Christian era of spiritual freedom, Paul urges a church community within a context of oppressive patriarchy, to let women

learn. Sadly, it has taken the Church almost two millennia to apply this teaching, so it's no wonder that the freedom of Paul calling us to God's original purposes for gender has been missed. Given this historical injustice to women, it is also not surprising that Paul's qualification of women learning 'quietly with all submissiveness' is often viewed as negative, rather than in the light of other positive biblical teachings regarding a submissive and quiet spirit. Another reason the liberating tone of Paul's message is often missed, is because biblical teachings about headship and submission within individual marriages have often been misapplied to general male/female relationships. Moreover, the too-frequent perversion of Christlike leadership into abusive dominance has increased the desire to escape the traditional interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:11–15.

Yet Yahweh God is not an unloving husband nor an oppressive father. Paul reminds us of God the Father's gentle and loving nature when he talks of the church as 'God's household'. Paul draws on this metaphor of church to family in chapter 5 of this same letter. Here his instructions about how to treat others in the church, are based on the same principles of relative age and gender which determine relationships and roles in a human family, that is, categories of fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers. If respecting each other as family members of different ages and genders is kept in view when reading 1 Timothy:11-15, instead of seeing the restrictive oppression of women, we will be able to see the freedom of living within God's original purposes for men and women.

Women with quiet submissive hearts will welcome godly men assuming leadership where it entails Adam-like responsibility for knowing God's commands and the nature of the creation he formed, including the nature of the one Adam named 'snake'. Church members will be glad to hold to God's ordering within his family, because it will protect them against the 'false teachers' who sneakily ply their deception first to women, all the while encouraging men to let women take the lead. Children will flourish having mothers who welcome their feminine role as child-bearers and nurturers. And there will be overflowing blessing from women in general who, by persevering in honouring mothering with godliness, will be able to increasingly overcome the consequences of sin and work redemptively with God to fulfil his purposes for his family.

I believe that Paul's teaching about relative gender authority in 1 Timothy 2 means that elder-type leadership is a role that God has

given to the men in his family. It is the role that fathers carry in human families, where the combination of authority to discern truth and to enforce it, is unique. The fact that this role is given to men is not because women cannot lead—they can and do in significant and powerfully influential ways—but rather because women lead best when the distinctiveness of the two genders God made is valued and honoured. And proclaiming this in our churches today will help ‘the church of the living God’ to remain ‘a pillar and buttress of the truth’ (1 Tim 3:15).

## Reference List

- Baldwin HS 2005. An important word: *authenteo* in 1 Timothy 2:12. In Kostenberger AJ and Schreiner TR (eds). *Women in the church: an analysis and application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 39–52. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Baugh SM 2005. A foreign world: Ephesus in the first century. In Kostenberger AJ and Schreiner TR (eds). *Women in the church: an analysis and application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 13–38. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Celoria H 2013. Does 1 Timothy 2 prohibit women from teaching, leading and speaking in the church? *Priscilla Papers* 27(3) 20–23.
- Croft S 2013. The women of the early church. In Croft S and Gooder P (eds) 2013. *Women and men in scripture and the church: a guide to the key issues*, 23–32. Norwich: Canterbury Press.
- Cunningham L and Hamilton DJ 2000. *Why not women?* Seattle: YWAM Publishing.
- Davis JF 2009. First Timothy 2:12, the ordination of women, and Paul’s use of creation narratives. *Priscilla Papers* 23(2)5–10.
- deSilva DA 2004. *An introduction to the New Testament: context, methods and ministry formation*. Nottingham: InterVarsity Press.
- Doriani D 2003. *Women and ministry*. Wheaton: Crossway.
- Dodds A 2019. *(A)Typical woman: free, whole and called in Christ*. Wheaton: Crossway. Electronic edition: Kindle Cloud, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).
- ESV Study Bible*. 2008. China: Crossway.
- Foh ST 1979. *Women & the Word of God: a response to Biblical Feminism*. USA: Presbyterian and Reformed Co.

- Gorman MJ 2004. *Apostle of the crucified Lord: a theological introduction to Paul and his letters*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Grudem W 1987. Prophecy—yes, but teaching—no: Paul’s consistent advocacy of women’s participation without governing authority. *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 30(1)11–23.
- Guthrie D 2007. The pastoral letters. In Carson da, France RT, Motyer JA and Wenham GJ (eds), *New Bible Commentary*, 1294–1304. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press.
- House HW 1979. Paul, women, and contemporary evangelical feminism. *Bibliotheca sacra* 136(541)40–53.
- Johnson AF (ed.) 2010. *How I changed my mind about women in leadership: compelling stories from prominent evangelicals*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Keener CS 2004 [2012]. *Paul, women & wives: marriage and women’s ministry in the letters of Paul*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. Electronic edition: Kindle Cloud, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).
- Larson K 2000. I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon. In M Anders (ed.) *Holman New Testament Commentary*, 167–177. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- Long Westfall C 2016. *Paul and Gender: reclaiming the Apostle’s vision for men and women in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Moss C M 1994. 1,2 Timothy & Titus. In J Cottrell and T Ash (eds), *The college Press NIV Commentary*. Joplin: College Press.
- Oden TC 1989. First and Second Timothy and Titus. In JL Mays and PJ Achtemeier (eds), *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 92–102. Louisville: J Knox Press.
- Piper J [2019]. Sexual Complementarity. Lecture 5: Men and women in ministry. Online audio lecture. Accessed from [www.biblicaltraining.org](http://www.biblicaltraining.org). 2019/08.
- Richter W & Wiseman DJ 1996. Judges. In IH Marshall, AR Millard, JI Packer and DJ Wiseman (eds), *New Bible Dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), 627. England: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Schreiner TR 2005. An interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15: a dialogue with scholarship. In Kostenberger AJ and Schreiner TR (eds). *Women in the church: an analysis and application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 85–120. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Stott RW 1996. *The message of 1 Timothy and Titus: Guard the Truth*. Bible Speaks Today. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.

Towner PH 1994. 1–2 Timothy and Titus. In GR Osborne (ed.), *The IV New Testament Series*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.