

Women in Church Leadership

A Few Notes on 1 Timothy 2 – 3 and Beyond

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: September 10, 2011

We need to take 1 Timothy 2 and 3 together because the case for male-only eldership straddles both chapters. Chapter 2 is taken as the negative prohibition against women teaching men. Chapter 3 is taken as the positive prescription for men teaching as elders.

The first consideration is that Greek is a gendered language with gendered pronouns, like Spanish but unlike English. Greek does not have a generic non-gendered pronoun, and the masculine singular pronoun ‘he’ or ‘him’ is used when referring to a person of either gender. This is like the Spanish pronoun ‘el’. There is an ‘ella’ for ‘her’, but ‘el’ is used when the gender of the person is unknown or unspecified. Here are some examples of this in the New Testament: Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman and yet spoke to her using masculine pronouns, ‘Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give *him* will become in *him* a well of water springing up to eternal life’ (Jn.4:14); and Paul in 1 Timothy spoke of female widows being responsible to care for their families, yet he used masculine pronouns to describe them, ‘But if anyone does not provide for *his* own, and especially for those of *his* household, *he* has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever’ (1 Tim.5:8). Even in the Old Testament, when the divorce legislation of Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4 is phrased in the masculine sense, as a husband divorcing his wife, the rabbis viewed this as applicable to wives who wanted to divorce their husbands; moreover, Jesus affirmed that interpretation in Mark 10:12 when he was discussing the Sinaitic Law and exploring whether wives could divorce their husbands for infidelity (a historical note, however: starting from the 5th century BC, rabbinical interpretation started to deny wives that right because of the influence of Greek culture, which was very negative towards women). This is shown supremely in the fact that Jesus became man (*anthropos*) in a way that undeniably includes women. The stress there falls on Jesus as the divine-human being who redeems human nature in himself and offers a cleansed human nature back to men and women. Significantly, Jesus is never spoken of, and must never be spoken of, as the divine-male being who redeems male nature.

So when we find a masculine pronoun like ‘he’ or ‘him’ or ‘his’, we need to determine from both the immediate and wider context whether the writer is speaking exclusively about men or inclusively about both genders. Likewise, the masculine plural pronoun ‘they (men)’ or ‘them (men)’ are used when referring to a group of people of both genders. That’s like the Spanish pronoun ‘ellos’. Note also that the Greek words for ‘male’ (*arsesin*) and ‘female’ (*theleiai*) are specific and leave no ambiguity about what the writer intends to say, unlike the use of gendered pronouns or the use of the man as the example that includes women.

When we look at the role women played in Paul’s letters as leaders of house churches, including Junia, who was most likely an apostle (Rom.16:7), and Phoebe the deaconess of the church of Cenchrea who delivered Romans itself (Rom.16:1), there is decent reason to read 1 Timothy 3 as Paul speaking inclusively of both men and women, if we didn’t have 1 Timothy 2. Though Paul describes eldership using male pronouns and the example of a man, we can consider this andro-centric language, but not strictly an andro-centric institution. I’m thankful to Gordon Hugenberger, pastor of Park Street Church and professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, for introducing this point to me.

But we do have 1 Timothy 2, so that deserves comment, and more than I’m providing here. There are difficult translational issues here. To summarize them quickly: There is a question of whether ‘teach or exercise authority over’ is a literary hendyadis describing one thing with two words, or whether it is two separate concepts meant to be read as two separate things. Moreover, the word *autentein* (not *exousia*) which is translated ‘exercise authority over’ is difficult to pin down with surety; 67% of the time the word appears in the extant Greek literature, there are significant negative connotations connected to it, including the sense of ‘instigating or perpetuating a crime’. The word sometimes translated ‘silence’ in v.12 is the same word which is given the more measured translation ‘quietness’ in 1 Timothy 2:2 and 11. The verb ‘will be saved’ refers to a single female, but the verb ‘to continue’ refers to women in the plural. The word ‘childbearing’ has the definite article before it in Greek, thus reading ‘the childbearing’ and perhaps referring to Jesus’ birth. The word ‘if’ in v.11 is better translated ‘when’ or ‘when and if’.

All told, it is very possible to translate this passage: ¹¹ A wife must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. ¹² But I do not allow a wife to ‘lead a husband into error’, but to remain quiet. ¹³ For it was Adam

who was first created, and then Eve. ¹⁴ And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. [implied: *And Adam was in knowing rebellion against God through his own participation.*] ¹⁵ But 'she' [i.e. *Eve*] will be saved through 'the Childbearing' 'when and if' they [i.e. *the women referred to in 2:9*] continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint.'

An important note here: Adam in Genesis seems to have added 'and you shall not touch it' to God's command, even though the ban was on *eating*, not *touching*, the fruit. Hence, when Eve touched the fruit and did not die, her doubts about God's truthfulness would have been compounded. Her deception was partly the result of Adam providing her with misinformation. Adam made God appear stricter than He really was, perhaps to be extra sure that Eve did not go near the Tree. But this supplied Eve with doubts about God when she touched the fruit and did not die immediately. Interestingly enough, this bears some resemblance to the issues surrounding the Ephesians Christians that were under Timothy's charge; under the impact of ancient Greek culture and philosophy, they too were wrestling the physical creation including their bodies, marriage, and sexuality.

The particular sins or errors that some women – and surely some men as well – were falling into are discussed throughout 1 Timothy. One location is this: 'But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.' (1 Tim.4:1 – 3) This is very typical of the conflict between the Greek worldview which opposed spirit and matter, soul and body, and the Jewish and Christian worldview which affirms the goodness of God's creation, and the union of spirit and matter, where, 'Everything created by God is good, and nothing [i.e. food, sex within marriage] is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer' (1 Tim.4:4 – 5). If one modern observation can be brought in here, women are more able than men to restrain their own sexuality. It is a short step from there to gravitate towards a dualistic framework where the body and the creation are demeaned, although men had their own reasons for doing so in the Greek landscape, which alternatively led to strict abstinence (Stoicism) or promiscuity (Epicureanism) because both branches of thought grew from the same root, the idea that the body was irrelevant. Notice that Paul mentions certain psychologically vulnerable women in 2 Timothy 3:6 as being susceptible to bad teaching. Against this cultural and intellectual backdrop, Paul is reminding Timothy about his charge to teach faithfully the Jewish-Christian implications of creation theology. Far from being an absolute prohibition against women teaching, this is a mandate to help women learn. It is also a mandate to help anyone learn who is less educated and more vulnerable to incorrect ideas arising from one's cultural context. Paul enlists the story of Adam and Eve, not as a paradigm for a husband's sheer authority over his wife, but as a paradigm for how theological error creeps into even a marriage relationship. In fact, the use of Adam and Eve as an illustration is an apt counter to the Greek dualism and the denigration of the body, marriage, and childbearing, since in Jewish creation theology, the body, marriage, and childbearing are actually at quite at the center of what it means to be human. Referring to Adam and Eve invokes all that, and referring to 'the Childbearing' reminds us of the messianic promise connected to childbearing, that Jesus was the promised deliverer of Genesis 3:15 who was born 'the seed of the woman.' Far from being the curse or a stain as it was in Greek culture, where it was held that the immortal and pure soul was imprisoned for a while in a decaying body, childbearing was fundamentally positive in Jewish-Christian thought.

This translation commends itself, first of all, by the fact that it has no forced Greek. It fits with the literary context of 1 Timothy and the historical ideological conflict between Greek dualism and Jewish-Christian creation theology. It fits the historical evidence I highlighted in my analysis of 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, concerning Priscilla's role as a church elder in Rome, and the early church circulating *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* celebrating a female teacher (see <http://nagasawafamily.org/paul%201corinthians%20outline.htm>). It fits with my exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, wherein Paul tells women to pray and prophesy in the congregation, and then goes on to say that prophecy is the highest gift available to the common Christian (apostleship alone being higher). It fits with the presence of apparently influential female leaders in the churches throughout the New Testament. It fits with the practice of Jesus to teach women, enlist women as disciples, and send women as the first witnesses to his incarnation and his resurrection. It fits with the very important prophecy of Joel 2, that God will pour out His Spirit on both men and women so they both will prophesy, quoted by Simon Peter as inaugurated at Pentecost. It fits with the hints moving towards this reality in Mosaic Israel, with its female leaders, prophetesses, and judges. And it fits with the most natural understanding of what God intended from creation for men and women as His image-bearers.

The integration of the theme of speech into Jewish-Christian creation theology is a support to my point about gender and leadership. It seems to me that God’s command to rule and subdue was associated with human beings speaking and verbalizing their rule over the creation. Just as God brought forth life in creation by speaking, humans were to tend life primarily by speaking. This once again ties the first and second creation accounts closer to each other, since God’s commission to humanity to rule the creation finds one specific expression as Adam names the animals. The ontology of being in the divine image suggests some ability to act in a parallel way to God, who works by speaking. Logic also requires it: Adam and subsequently, Eve, had to verbally repeat God’s blessing and prohibition to all their descendants. This sustaining of God’s word through the word of humanity captures the essence of what it means to be God’s true humanity. Perhaps the animals even spoke back to humanity, which may have been the case since no one was surprised that the serpent could speak; the world of Adam and Eve may have been very close to C.S. Lewis’ Narnia, where some creatures understood the human tongue and could respond in turn. Regardless, the power of human speech is further reinforced by the Babel narrative, where humanity speaks like the creator God (‘Come, let us make’) and God Himself makes a cautionary remark, ‘nothing will be impossible for them’ (Gen.11:6), because humanity will weave a story together about themselves that does not include God. Thus, speech was an integral part of God’s work in creation, and humanity’s partnership with God in creation by virtue of God making them in His image. Mosaic Israel saw men and some women anointed by the Holy Spirit to speak in their midst, but this anointing was for leadership in Israel and not for the average person in their relationship with God. However, the prophet Joel expected God to restore both men and women to Spirit-empowered, right speech (Joel 2:28 – 32) because that is the way God intended men and women to operate from the creation. Jesus’ practice in the Gospels, as well as the subsequent apostolic witness in the New Testament, affirms that in Christ, God intentions from creation for both men and women are being restored.

The literary structure and content of Luke – Acts, in my mind, seals the deal. Luke uses a ‘thesis statement’ format in both his Gospel and in Acts. At the beginning of each work, a major leader – Jesus in the Gospel, Simon Peter in Acts – quotes from the Old Testament to summarize how the Holy Spirit will empower human proclamation of the word of God. Jesus quotes Isaiah 61, adding some ties to Isaiah 42 for good measure; Simon Peter quotes Joel 2. Then, the rest of the narrative substantiates the truth of what was just spoken. This table helps me see Luke’s stylistic format better:

	At the Beginning of the Story,	A Major Leader	Quotes from the OT	To Summarize How the Spirit Will Empower Proclamation	And then it Happens!
Luke	Luke 4	Jesus	Isaiah 61	‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to preach...to proclaim... ’ (Luke 4:18 – 19)	Jesus preaches and proclaims. (Luke 4:20ff.)
Acts	Acts 2	Simon Peter	Joel 2	‘And it shall be in the last days that I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind and your sons and daughters shall prophecy ...I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophecy. ’ (Acts 2:17 – 18)	The apostles and other leaders proclaim and prophecy. (Acts 2:19ff.)

The lynchpin here is Luke highlighting women in the ministry of the Spirit to speak through people. Luke effectively begins not with Zacharias, who is silenced for his lack of faith, but with his wife Elizabeth, and then the young Mary of Nazareth. Luke’s narrative begins by inverting an Old Testament archetype of ‘the elderly couple’ in which Abraham was faithful but Sarah doubted. That archetype was already used playfully in the book of Samuel when describing Elkanah and Hannah, since Elkanah was not only faithless but careless, while Hannah was quite faithful. Now, Luke perceives that archetype at work here, as he narrates an elderly husband silenced by God while his elderly wife gives praise to God and proclaims His doing. Then, Mary of Nazareth is given pride of place with her poetic Magnificat celebrating the conception of Jesus. This literary treatment of women is important because it corresponds thematically to Jesus undoing the fall, where a wife Eve brought a word of sin and death to her husband Adam, who then followed her into that sin and death. The redemption wrought by Jesus undoes the fall wrought by humanity. And in this redemption and renewal, women are the bearers of God’s word of life to men. Luke dramatizes this by his literary style of pairing people and events together in juxtaposition. In Luke 2:25 – 38, the remarkable faithful prophetess Anna matches the gracefully eloquent Simeon in the Temple. In Luke 7:1 – 17, Jesus provides two people with stories containing insight into his power over death, but the humble Jewish widow of Nain

has a greater insight and clarity than powerful Roman centurion with whom Luke pairs her. As noted in Luke 8:1 – 3, Jesus traveled with female along with male disciples, which was unprecedented and controversial for any rabbi. In Luke 10:38 – 42, the Jewish ideal of a man studying Torah in the Temple is replaced by the picture of Mary of Bethany listening to Jesus' teaching at his feet; and so on. This remarkable pattern continues through Jesus' resurrection, where some of Jesus' female disciples are the first to proclaim the empty tomb despite disbelief among the male disciples. Then in Acts, women play significant speaking roles: Lydia (Acts 16), Priscilla (Acts 18 – 19), and Philip's daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21). It affirms that indeed, God's word through Joel is now coming to pass through Jesus, which in turn invites us to reflect back upon God's original intentions for humanity from the beginning: for male and female to bear His word and speak it forth in creation.