

Understanding 1 Timothy 2:12

By Presiding Bishop Dwight Reed

What Was Really Going On in Ephesus?

There is great controversy regarding 1 Timothy 2:12, but the scripture is clear in its meaning. It is necessary to understand that neither one's Bishop nor Pastor possesses the authority to provide a personal interpretation of these texts. 2 Peter 1:20 says, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." Historically, the church has used much scripture out of context, leading many individuals to support or defend beliefs based on teachings from trusted leaders, regardless of their accuracy. Let me be clear, this is no disrespect to our fathers and mothers in the gospel who taught what they understood at the time. Nevertheless, we ought to be unwavering in our allegiance to the scripture itself, prioritizing it above any individual interpretation. We should not allow our respect for our leaders to overshadow our allegiance to the Word of God. I encourage all individuals to seek spiritual enlightenment in their engagement with scripture. Let us place the truth of the Word at the forefront of our understanding. I pray God give you spiritual revelation in all scripture.

THE VERSE:

"I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet." (1 Timothy 2:12, NIV)

This verse has historically been cited to restrict women from teaching and leadership. However, examining Paul's specific context shows he was not aiming to establish a universal rule; rather, he addressed particular issues in Ephesus.

THE EPHESIAN CONTEXT

1. The Cult of Artemis (Diana)

Ephesus was home to the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. This dominant religious system had a profound influence:

- Prominent female priestesses - Women served as high priestesses and held significant religious authority in the cult
- Female prominence in mythology - In Greek mythology, Artemis was born before Apollo, and this primacy may have influenced teachings about female superiority
- Fertility goddess worship - Artemis was worshiped as the protector of childbirth and women in labor, unlike the Greek huntress Artemis.
- Economic power - The cult controlled significant wealth and commerce (Acts 19:23-27)

2. False Teaching in the Ephesian Church

Paul's letters to Timothy reveal specific problems in Ephesus. The false teachers were promoting:

- Myths and genealogies (1 Timothy 1:4)
- Departure from the faith through demonic teachings (1 Timothy 4:1)

- Prohibition of marriage and certain foods (1 Timothy 4:3)
- Godless myths and old wives' tales (1 Timothy 4:7)
- Claims that the resurrection had already occurred (2 Timothy 2:18)

Women were particularly vulnerable:

- "Weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:6-7)
- Some younger widows were "saying things they ought not to" and going "from house to house" spreading false teaching (1 Timothy 5:13)

3. Educational Disparities

Critical context: In the first century, women in Ephesus generally lacked formal education:

- Greek and Jewish women rarely received theological training.
- Many had been recently converted from paganism.
- They were transitioning from Artemis worship with its false creation theology.
- New believers needed to learn sound doctrine before they could teach it.

EXAMINING THE GREEK TEXT

AUTHENTEIN (αὐθεντεῖν) - "To Assume Authority."

This Greek word appears **only once** in the entire New Testament (a hapax legomenon). This is significant:

Common meanings of authentein in contemporary literature:

- To domineer
- To usurp authority
- To act violently
- To murder or commit suicide

Paul's usual word for legitimate authority:

- He typically used "*exousia*" (ἐξουσία) for proper authority.
- His choice of "*authentein*" instead suggests he's addressing **unauthorized or domineering** behavior rather than legitimate leadership.

The Structure of the Sentence

Greek: "didaskein de gynaiki ouk epitrepō oude authentein andros"

The construction links teaching and authority together as **one problematic activity**, not two separate prohibitions. Paul specifically forbade **teaching that dominates/usurps authority** over men.

WHAT PAUL WAS REALLY SAYING?

The Immediate Problem (vv. 11-15)

Verse 11: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission."

- Revolutionary statement! Women were being told to **learn** - highly unusual for that culture.

- "Quietness" (ἡσυχία, hēsychia) means peaceful learning, not absolute silence.
- The same word is used for men in verse 2 - should men never speak in church?

Verse 12: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man"

- "I do not permit" (οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω) - **present tense**, indicating a current, temporary situation
- Paul is addressing a **specific problem** in Ephesus, not setting a precedent for all churches or for all time. His focus is corrective, not prescriptive.
- Women needed to learn sound doctrine before they could teach it.

Verses 13-14: The Creation and Fall reference

- Paul corrects the Artemis-influenced false teaching that women came first.
- He establishes proper biblical creation order (Adam first, then Eve)
- He addresses the deception that was occurring - Eve was deceived by false teaching, just as Ephesian women were being deceived.
- This is **corrective teaching**, not prescriptive prohibition.

Verse 15: "But women will be saved through childbearing"

- This confusing verse makes sense in context: the Artemis cult forbade marriage.
- Paul affirms that Christian women are not saved by celibacy or cult practices.
- They will be preserved/saved through the normal course of life (bearing children) if they continue in faith.

THE BROADER BIBLICAL WITNESS

Women in Leadership - Old Testament

- Deborah - Judge and prophet who led Israel (Judges 4-5)
- Huldah - Prophet who authenticated Scripture and advised kings (2 Kings 22:14-20)
- Miriam - Prophet and worship leader (Exodus 15:20)
- Esther - Risked her life and delivered her nation from genocide (Esther 4:14-16; 7-9)

Women in Jesus' Ministry

- Mary Magdalene - First witness and proclaimer of the resurrection (John 20:17-18)
- The Samaritan woman - First evangelist to the Gentiles (John 4)
- Women - Supported Jesus' ministry financially and practically (Luke 8:1-3)
- Jesus violated cultural norms by teaching women as disciples.

Women in Paul's Ministry

Paul commended women leaders:

- Phoebe - "deacon" (διάκονος) and "prostatist" (benefactor/patron) of Paul himself (Romans 16:1-2)
- Priscilla - Taught Apollos theology (Acts 18:26), listed before her husband.
- Junia - "Outstanding among the apostles" (Romans 16:7)
- Euodia and Syntyche - "Contended at my side in the cause of the gospel" (Philippians 4:2-3)

- Lydia - Businesswoman and first European convert who hosted the church in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15, 40)
- Nympha - Hosted church in her home (Colossians 4:15)

Paul's declarations:

- "In Christ... there is neither... male nor female" (Galatians 3:28)
- Both men and women pray and prophesy in church (1 Corinthians 11:4-5)
- The gift of prophecy and teaching are given "to each one" without gender restriction (1 Corinthians 12:7-11)

CONCLUSION: WHAT WAS REALLY GOING ON?

The Ephesian situation:

- Women were emerging from a matriarchal cult with false theology.
- They lacked education in Scripture.
- False teachers were specifically targeting women.
- Some women were teaching Artemis-influenced doctrine that contradicted Genesis.
- Disruption and disorder threatened the church's witness.

Paul's response:

- Women must **learn** (affirming their capacity and calling)
- Until educated, they shouldn't teach error over men.
- Correct the false creation theology.
- Restore order to worship

The principle for today:

- Anyone (male or female) must be properly taught before they teach.
- No one should domineer or usurp authority.
- Sound doctrine matters
- The Holy Spirit gifts both men and women for ministry (Acts 2:17-18)

SCHOLARLY CITATIONS & SOURCES

Primary Historical Sources on Ephesian Artemis

- Strabo, Geography 4.1.4-5 - Documents the priestess Aristarche and the Phocaean foundation of Massilia, showing female priesthood tradition
- Pausanias 8.1.13 - References the annual service of the *essēnes* at the Artemis temple
- Pliny the Elder, Natural History 35.40 - Describes the *Megabyzoi* (temple officials) and temple structure (425 feet x 225 feet, 127 columns, 60 feet high)
- Acts 19:23-41 - Biblical account of the riot in Ephesus over declining Artemis worship due to Christian conversion.
- Callimachus, "Hymn to Artemis" (3rd century BC) - Artemis's role as a helper in childbirth

Modern Scholarly Resources

On Women's Roles in Ephesian Religious Life:

- Kearsley, R.A. (1986) - Documents fifteen women serving as *archiereiai* ("high priests") in Ephesus, the largest known group from any ancient city. Women held these titles independently, not as dependents of husbands.
- Strelan, Rick (1996). *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter. Comprehensive study of the Artemis cult's influence on early Christianity in Ephesus.
- Bremmer, Jan (2005). "Priestly Personnel of the Ephesian Artemision: Anatolian, Persian, Greek, and Roman Aspects." In *Practitioners of the Divine*. Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies. Analysis of the priesthood structure, including maiden priestesses.

On 1 Timothy Context:

- Gritz, Sharon Hodgkin (1991). *Paul, Women Teachers, and the Mother Goddess at Ephesus: A Study of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in Light of the Religious and Cultural Milieu of the First Century*. University Press of America. Detailed examination of how Artemis worship influenced the Ephesian church.
- Arnold, Clinton E. (1989). *Ephesians: Power and Magic*. Cambridge University Press. Documents Ephesus as a commercial and religious center.
- Baugh, S.M. (1999). "Cult Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal." *Tyndale Bulletin* 50.1: 443-460. Definitely shows no evidence of temple prostitution at the Artemis temple in Ephesus.

On Greek Word Analysis:

- Ferguson, Everett (2003). *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Discusses the transition from eunuch priests to virgin grand priestesses under Roman rule.
- Bromily, G.W., ed. (1979). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Details on temple hierarchy and priesthood structure.

Additional Context:

- Mowczko, Marg (2009/2025). "1 Timothy 2:12 in Context (2): Artemis of Ephesus" and "The Prominence of Women in the Cults of Ephesus." Careful scholarly analysis noting that while women held significant religious roles, claims must be evidence-based.
- Ramsay, W.M. (1900). *The Letters to the Seven Churches*. Early documentation suggests that cultic activity for women was more prominent in Asia Minor than elsewhere.

Key Archaeological Evidence

Ephesian Inscriptions (I.Eph) - Multiple inscriptions document women serving as priestesses and religious leaders:

- Julia Pantima Potentilla: Priestess and Kosmeteira of Artemis (I.Eph 983, AD 177-180)
- Larcia Theogenis Juliane: Prytanis, Gymnasiarch, and Priestess of Artemis (I.Eph 985, early 3rd century)
- Quintilia Varilla: Priestess of Artemis (I.Eph, 2nd century)

What the Evidence Supports

- The Temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.
- Women served as priestesses and held significant religious authority.
- Ephesian Artemis was associated with fertility and protection during childbirth.
- In Greek mythology, Artemis was born before Apollo and helped deliver him.
- The cult had major economic and social influence in Ephesus.
- Women held more public religious roles in Ephesus than in most ancient cities.

For Further Reading

- Payne, Philip B. *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters*. Zondervan, 2009.
- Keener, Craig S. *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul*. Hendrickson, 1992.
- Belleville, Linda L. "Teaching and Usurping Authority: 1 Timothy 2:11–15." In *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, edited by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis. InterVarsity Press, 2005.

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"The kingdom of God is not about restricting who can serve, but about equipping all believers to fulfill their calling in Christ."

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