1 Timothy 2:11–15 [1]

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In this article, I aim to demonstrate that 1 Timothy 2:12–15 contain several contradictions with the rest of Scripture. These contradictions should give pause to uncritically interpreting it as giving a clear, unambiguous, and universal prohibition against woman teachers and leaders within the church. This caution does not arise from speculation about what Paul could have meant in light of the cultural context of Ephesus (as many people try to approach this passage). Instead, these contradictions are wholly grounded in consistent teachings of Scripture. In other words, concerning these contradictions, 1 Timothy 2:12–15 is the outlier, rather than the contradictions being proof texts which were picked to prove a specific point. Despite these contradictions, this passage, as part of Holy Scripture, cannot be ignored or dismissed. However, Paul's reasoning (as far as we can discern it) should be weighed against what the rest of Scripture teaches.

Introduction

Egalitarian interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:12–14 tend to argue that Paul is not giving a universal prohibition against women pastors and leaders, but that the passage should be contextualised in the specific situation of Ephesus of the time. Irrespective of whether such arguments have merit, they come across as ad hoc. Without this cultural context (which is also speculative), scripture alone cannot be used to interpret scripture, which some teachers see as problematic. Paul's language in this passage, and the justification he uses for his reasoning, certainly makes the prohibitions seem universal. Complementarians often, and not wholly unreasonably, find such egalitarian reasoning unconvincing. They therefore prefer the plain reading of the text (largely) as being most faithful to God's will in the matter.

My intention with this article is not to rehash typical egalitarian interpretations, but to point out that this short passage contains multiple contradictions with the Old Testament, the gospels, and Paul's other writings. Recognising this abundance of contradictions should give one pause in rushing to embrace the plain reading.

I shall start with a brief overview of the passage and some general comments about what makes it a difficult passage to translate. Then I shall discuss the contradictions found in the passage.

Overview of the Passage

> But I don't permit a woman to teach, nor to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Adam wasn't deceived, but the woman, being deceived, has fallen into disobedience.

1 Timothy 2:12–14

Volumes have been written about this passage, and I cannot survey all that has been said about it. To only mention the most salient points:

1. There is a double injunction here:
    - A woman should not teach[1]
    - A woman should not have authority over a man
2. Paul writes that this is something that *he* does, and does not explicitly state that everyone ought to follow his example[2]
3. Women are prohibited from teaching and having authority because of the order of creation, and as a direct result of Eve's actions during the Fall
4. If the text is taken at face value, then there is a further difficulty in verse 15, which states that "but she will be saved through her childbearing, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with sobriety"; this seems to contradict the doctrine of being saved "by grace, through faith alone", and raises questions about Christian women who never married, had children, or could have children

The first point has been used to exclude women from particular teaching roles (whether as pastors, teaching theology at seminaries, or even writing books or speaking on radio programmes where men in the audience may learn something), as well as holding ecclesiastical authority, such as serving on church councils. How far these prohibitions are enforced varies widely among complementarians.

On the second point, I have never heard a convincing rebuttal. Yes, Paul is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but elsewhere (1 Corinthians 7:12) Paul distinguishes between what he writes, and what the Spirit commands. It seems to me that a more prudent application of what Paul wrote here is not "God institutes a universal prohibition on women teachers", but, at best, "for the reason Paul gives, we need to be more careful and judicious before appointing a woman teacher or leader" (although care and prudence should always be exercised before elevating anyone to the position of teacher: 1 Timothy 5:22).

On the third point, I get the impression that complementarians are often satisfied with only the mention that Eve was created after Adam. This means that they can tie up a wife's role within a family with the prohibition of not being able to teach men. However, the text mentions both created order and fault in the Fall, and they should therefore be taken together as Paul's reason for the prohibition. Indeed, since both points are mentioned together, they are inextricably tied, because we cannot know what Paul's prohibition would have looked like if any of those conditions were different: what if God had created man and woman simultaneously? What if Adam was first deceived and not Eve? Paul does not only mention one condition, so a condition such as "women were created after men" should not be used (from this passage) to defend an entire theology of women teaching and leading.

Context

I am not going to delve deep into the context of the passage. But context is important. This passage often seems to be taught as if it is an axiomatic commandment, like one of the Ten Commandments. Instead, we should keep in mind that Paul's stated purpose in writing to Timothy was to

> that you might command certain men[3] not to teach a different doctrine, and not to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than God's stewardship, which is in faith… some, having missed the mark, have turned away to vain talking, desiring to be teachers of the law, though they understand neither what they say nor about what they strongly affirm
>
> 1 Timothy 1:3b–4; 6b–8

In other words, the church in Ephesus at the time, particularly, was at constant risk of bad teaching. It was not a church full of "super Christians" whom Paul was polishing with doctrine. He needed Timothy not to give up on them (1 Timothy 1:3), but to bring order through faithful obedience and example to others (1 Timothy 6:11–12). This is a long term mission. But Paul also needed him to do damage control. The people in the church would likely all have been first generation Christians, trying to figure out what it means and looks like to be Christian. They did not have the benefit of a complete Bible as we have it today, or creeds, or well established traditions.

Interpretive Difficulties

From the outset, we need to recognise that it may be more difficult to interpret the pastoral epistles compared to the general epistles. If one knows someone personally, more may be understood without being said, and there may be more explicit context not being addressed. In contrast, when Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he had not met them, and there was little history and shared context. Therefore, Paul wrote more exhaustively to be clear and unambiguous. In his letters to the Corinthians, he explicitly mentions controversies because the congregation had asked him to comment on them (or he had heard about them while being away from them). If Paul wrote the same content to Timothy or Titus, and if they had a shared experience of these controversies while being together, he may have spoken about it generally without referring to the context, because, between Paul and Timothy or Titus, what he was referring to could go without saying[4]. Therefore, simply by recognising that 1 Timothy is a personal letter, we should already be prepared for possibly a more difficult task of interpretation due to unstated context. This, of course, does not mean that we should not even attempt to interpret the text. But it should give us pause, and endow us with a sense of humility, that we don't know what we don't know [2].

Another difficulty which must be acknowledged, is that this passage is, at a technical level, more challenging than usual to translate and interpret. This may not be evident when reading a typical translation of this passage, but a good commentary will acknowledge this fact. Verse 12, for example, contains a Greek word (αὐθεντεῖν) which only occurs here in the entire New Testament. Although we know what the word means ("to have authority") from other Greek texts, different translators translate it differently. An important question arises in why Paul chose to use that word here, because he could have used another word (which does get used throughout the New Testament) to mean "to have authority", such as ὑπεροχῇ (which he used in 1 Timothy 2:2 and 1 Corinthians 2:1), or ἐπιταγή, which he used in Romans, both letters to the Corinthians, and Titus. This could be an indication of a probable cultural reference or "inside information"; something that we, two thousand years removed from personal conversations between Paul and Timothy, and perhaps the Ephesian community, cannot know. This is another reason to read this passage with humility, rather than confidence and certainty.

I am not exaggerating how difficult this passage is to interpret and understand. To illustrate, in at least one debate on whether women should teach in church [3] (direct audio link [4]), *both sides* agreed to not use this passage in the debate because of the difficulties associated with it, and rather argue their respective positions from other parts of Scripture.

Contradictions

In my estimation, in this brief passage, there are no fewer than four, possibly five, contradictions. This should signal to us to be very careful in taking the literal reading at face value, and to reflect and contemplate on these contradictions.

I shall begin with the most obvious one, which, given a literal reading, leaves many interpreters scratching their heads.

Salvation Through Childbearing

> she will be saved through her childbearing
>
> 1 Timothy 2:15

The question is to what “saved” here refers. If it refers to eternal salvation (which seems most likely, as the immediate context is a discussion of the Fall), then the problem with a literal reading here is that we are saved by grace and through faith alone (Titus 3:5), not through *anything* that we do.

Some people have argued that “saved” here means “being kept safe in childbirth” (a curse on women which accompanied the Fall). But this, as a consequence of faithfulness, is demonstrably false, as many faithful believers have suffered and died during childbirth. Therefore, this is not a universal reprieve of the curse.

It has also been suggested that the reference here is not to childbearing in general, but specifically to the birth of Christ, who came to bring salvation and restore our fallen position. If this is Paul’s intended meaning, then the implication (“but”) is that women who are in Christ should no longer be held accountable for a sinful state from which they have been redeemed (more on that below)[5]. Where Eve is one of the representatives of mankind in that she reflects how we would all fail to be perfectly obedient to God, Mary has become the example, not of some sinless superhuman, but of what faithful obedience to God looks like, even when faced with great uncertainty (and danger) in allowing God to work out His plan through you.

This short phrase is subject to a variety of interpretations, because the plain reading does not fit with established doctrine. Yet some people still insist that the preceding verses do not suffer from any ambiguities or difficulties. This leads to special pleading: the preceding verses are taken literally, but this verse should be interpreted judiciously to align with the rest of Scripture. This is a double standard, which seems to be motivated by *wanting* the plain reading of the previous verses to be true, rather than wrestling with the possibility that it may not.

Primacy in Creation

The second contradiction is the primacy of Adam in the creation of humans. Adam was indeed created first, and Adam did name[6] womankind (Genesis 2:23), and Eve specifically (Genesis 3:20), but Scripture never states that this act gave men dominion over women, and, in fact, the creation account draws attention to their equality for being made in God’s Image:

> God created man in his own image. In God’s image he created him; male and female he created them.
>
> Genesis 1:27

In Genesis 2:18, God creates the woman to be Adam’s “helper”. The word is widely accepted to mean *counterpart*, not *subordinate*.

Nowhere else in Scripture is it a “problem” that women were created second. The doctrine of the imago Dei is crucial for the Christian worldview, yet here we have an Orwellian “equal, but”. The implications can be similar to how Genesis 9:25–27 and 10 have been misused to justify racial superiority [5]: “equal, but”.

Sin of Adam vs Sin of Eve

The third contradiction is about Eve having greater guilt or fault than Adam (1 Timothy 2:14). Although Eve undoubtedly “took some of the fruit, and ate” (Genesis 3:6), it is widely agreed that Adam was complicit (possibly even present) and, in fact, the Bible consistently lays the blame with *Adam* (Hosea 6:7, Job 31:33, Romans 5:14). Only here in 1 Timothy 2 is Eve blamed for the Fall over Adam.

An objection to this view is that Eve was the one who was misled by the snake, and as the representative of womankind, women are easily deceived and lead men to their fall.

In response, even this passage, as the only passage in the Bible which blames Eve for the Fall instead of Adam, does not go so far as to say that the Fall came through the woman *necessarily*. Therefore, a possible world can exist where the serpent did not deceive Eve, but Adam instead.

The implication is this: Adam and Eve together are the representatives of humanity, insofar that, if any of us were in their shoes, we would have failed in the same manner as they had. We are not punished for their sin so much as they are templates of how all of us would have behaved. But Genesis does not claim that any woman would have been more easily deceived than any man, and then necessarily led the man to stumble.

If the restrictions under discussion are in place because women are descended from Eve, rather than Eve’s fall is representative of all women, then the principle of Deuteronomy 24:16 comes into view: descendants should not be punished for the crimes of their forebears.

Adam Was Deceived

The passage claims that Adam wasn’t deceived, but Eve was and fell into disobedience. Eve was deceived by the snake. The snake clearly targeted her. But Adam was also deceived, because he did end up eating of the forbidden fruit along with Eve. Either he was present when the snake deceived Eve and believed his lies as well, or he still disobeyed when Eve brought him the forbidden fruit. He did not resist and remain faithful.

A Personal Observation

Unfortunately, throughout the history of the church, men in teaching and leadership roles were not always regenerated, obedient and faithful. The men who were ordained to teaching and leadership positions (many by well meaning predecessors) who ended up being corrupt, wicked, and unfaithful, cannot be numbered. Men clearly are not automatically immune from the effects of sin, even when serving the church. If men are in need of grace and restoration to be able to effectively serve the church, why cannot such grace and sanctification be given to women? I weep at the thought of how many churches were led astray or destroyed by bad and corrupt leaders simply because they were the male successors, and I wonder whether some of those examples, at least, could have been prevented if the pool of potential faithful servants and stewards weren’t halved.

Nature of Salvation

The next contradiction that I want to address is the one which I regard as, by far, the most significant.

1. Those who are in Christ [6], *are* a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17); still fallen, yes, and still being sanctified, but at a fundamental level, *already* a new creation

2. Those who are in Christ, have had their past, present, and future sins forgiven (Hebrews 10:14, Romans 8:1); they are no longer defined by their sin

3. The church is to live out the Kingdom of God—which has been inaugurated by Jesus, but has not yet reached its fullness—on earth, and model the Kingdom to the rest of the world

Paul (seemingly) does not prohibit women from teaching arbitrarily. A reason is given. And the reason given is “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Adam wasn’t deceived, but the woman, being deceived, has fallen into disobedience.”

But, given the above points, this prohibition has some terrible implications:

1. Although those in Christ, as a new creation, still suffer from the effects of sin (e.g. work is toil, and our bodies will die and decay, etc.), we (those who are in Christ, and thus the church) should work to “roll back” the curse, in a sense; work *is* toil, but we do not despair of it, but rather view it as a good thing from God’s original intention; we still experience physical death, but we do not despair of death, but look forward to the resurrection (toward this hope, the apostles, in their announcement of the Kingdom of God, raised people from the dead, just like Jesus did—Acts 9:36–42, 20:7–12)

2. The blood of Jesus is sufficient to cover all our sins (to the extent that they are not counted against us), *except* when it comes to women and how they are to relate to men

3. If the church is to model the Kingdom (as it will be in the new creation) to the world, but the church prohibits women from teaching because of Eve’s sin, then we are saying that, even in new creation, when the Kingdom of God has been fulfilled, the curse of Eve will still hang over women

In summary, by taking the literal reading at face value, we are saying that Eve’s sin is one which (for now, at least), will not be forgiven for her offspring, even though we are otherwise no longer condemned (Romans 8:1).

A complementarian will say that men and women have different *roles* within society and church which God ordained. Such an argument can be made from elsewhere in Scripture, but that is *not* the argument that Paul is making in this passage. He is not saying that women cannot lead or teach solely because God has a different design for their purpose (based on the order of creation), but that they cannot do so because of a consequence of sin. That assertion is what needs to be addressed and held up to the rest of Scripture.

To Teach or Not to Teach

The last possible contradiction is that women are prohibited from teaching, either completely, or only men (either of which would rule them out as general pastors for a church). This prohibition is, apparently, because women are inherently “disobedient” because Eve was deceived. But in Titus 2:4, Paul wrote that older women ought to teach younger women[7]. It is also generally considered biblical that women should teach (at least their own) children (e.g. Proverbs 1:8–9). And

so, even if Paul is not laying a general prohibition on women teaching in 1 Timothy 2:12, then we still have a contradiction, because the prohibition exists specifically because “the woman, being deceived, has fallen into disobedience”. If women are inherently so deceived that they have fallen into disobedience to the point of not being able to teach (men) faithfully, then why should they be trusted to teach other women and children? Wouldn’t they, then, equally be a danger to lead these groups of people (younger women and children) astray? If original sin disqualifies women from teaching men, it should then also disqualify women from teaching at all. But, if God’s grace can sanctify women, rolling back the effects of the Fall, and allow them to be faithful and efficacious in teaching other women or children, then why can such grace not be extended to teaching men?

Some complementarians are content to let women teach, as long as it is not about matters of theology or the Bible. They may be considered perfectly capable of teaching knitting, biology, astronomy, or economics (even to men), but cannot veer into the ecclesiastical disciplines. This is problematic in a different way, as it creates a neo-platonic secular-vs-sacred divide, which would have been a strange outlook on the world to the Jews of the first century. Why would it be permissible for a woman to proclaim that “the heavens declare the glory of God; the expanse shows His handiwork”, but not “He ascended to His Father and your Father, to my God and your God”?

Conclusion

Given the abundance of contradictions with the rest of Scripture in only three verses, I have to conclude that what Paul wrote to Timothy regarding the prohibition of women as teachers and leaders cannot, and should not, be taken at face value as universal commands. I won’t claim to know what his intention was, but there are theories [7].

Paul wrote to the Galatians that

> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
>
> Galatians 3:28

This verse has been abused to no end, but its meaning is clear if one understands what Paul meant by “in Christ [6]”. In the Kingdom of God, the hierarchies which we have constructed (or perpetuated) on earth do not apply. Irrespective of race, caste, or sex, we are all participants in the Kingdom of God, all recipients of grace, and need to work for the Kingdom of God, according to the talents that we have received (Matthew 25:14–30)8.

We see something similar in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians

> He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, shepherds and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, to the work of serving, to the building up of the body of Christ,
>
> Ephesians 4:11–12

These callings were not distributed according to class or caste: Paul acknowledged women who were prophets (1 Corinthians 11:5, Acts 21:8–9) and apostles (Romans 16:7), he would have believed that women prophesying and being Spirit filled was biblical (Joel 2:28–29), and he knew that it was women who went to the tomb and evangelised that it was empty. Surely Paul would have acknowledged Deborah, in her capacity as a judge, as a shepherd of Israel. Why, then, would all those callings be independent from sex, but teaching Scripture not?

The purpose of advocating a more nuanced reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 is not to serve some

purpose such as “equality” or “feminism”, as if it were a grand virtue which transcends God’s commandments and created order, but so that all those who are in Christ, and entrusted with the necessary talents, can work towards “the building up of the body of Christ”.

- 1. Here, “to teach” either stands alone (i.e. women should not teach at all), or that it connects with having authority over men (i.e. teaching with authority). That is to say, the precise meaning is ambiguous.
- 2. Some scholars argue that Paul knew that he was writing Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit, and therefore even language which seems to indicate a personal preference should be interpreted as divinely authoritative. However, this contradicts 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul draws explicit distinctions between his recommendations and God’s commandments. Paul’s preferences, as those of an apostle, are worth serious consideration, but should not be elevated to that of divine will, particularly where the language of personal preference is explicit, as in 1 Timothy 2:12.
- 3. The word that Paul used here is gender neutral in the Greek.
- 4. Critical scholars reject the pastoral epistles (Timothy and Titus) as being written by Paul, in part because of the use of language in these letters compared to the letters which are considered authentic. The author does not hold to this view, and if the pastoral epistles are indeed authentically Pauline, then that proves that Paul had a different writing style when addressing individuals rather than whole congregations (which should come as no surprise to anyone).
- 5. Although I want to avoid speculation, something occurred to me while revising this paragraph that I think needs to be shared. We know that the apostles conducted household baptisms (Acts 10:48, 16:33). Perhaps this was more common than we realise. In the context for the first century Roman world, if the _pater familias_ converted, his household may well have followed him, but if only a wife or slave or child converted, they could not compel the rest of the household to be converted. This would mean that, if married women joined their husbands in church, they might not all have been in Christ (baptised, but not yet born again). If the husbands of these women were in Christ, then that could also makes sense of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35: if the wives haven’t fully grasped the gospel, but their husbands (who are in Christ) have, then it makes sense that they should ask their husbands at home, rather than interrupt the assembled believers. It would also make sense of why wives, specifically, are addressed in that passage, and not women in general. Unmarried women, or the married women who attended the assembly whose husbands were not in Christ and did not join the assembly (and who would not be able to answer their believing wives' questions anyway), would likely be in Christ, and not prone to the disruptive question asking that Paul is concerned about. This would then also not be a universal prohibition, but something of particular relevance in the first century Roman world. If there was uncertainty over which of the wives were truly in Christ and which not, that would be cause for caution in allowing them to teach the rest of the assembly. Again, this is speculation, and not explicitly stated in the texts.
- 6. In some cultures and contexts, the act of giving a name is a sign of dominion.
- 7. The instruction to “exhort younger men” in Titus 2:6 is, grammatically in the Greek, directed at Titus, and cannot be construed to refer back to the older women mentioned in verse 4.
- 8. Imagine, in the parable that Jesus told, the ruler’s wrath if he was told some servants actively prevented others from using their talents!

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