

Is the Tradition of Ordaining Men Only Based on Temporary, Local Prohibitions?

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Those who promote the ordination of women in the LCA quite commonly dismiss the prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 14:33^b-38 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14, because they are held to apply only for a time and in a particular context. It is argued that women were not allowed to be pastors in the ancient world to avoid giving offense and thus hampering the spread of the gospel in what was, by and large, a patriarchal society. But that is no longer the case for us in the western world due to the cultural, social and political changes that have occurred. In fact, the opposite now applies. Those prohibitions have become an unnecessary obstacle to the mission of the church in the modern world. Since it is assumed that they do not apply to the church at all times and in all places, the LCA not only may ordain women but should actually do so.

Apart from its questionable assumptions about the ancient world and modern society and the strategy of Christ and his apostles in the early church, this superficially attractive justification does not square with the facts. In these two texts there are three remarks that show that these prohibitions do not just apply to ancient Corinth and ancient Ephesus.

First, in 1 Corinthians 14:33^b Paul writes that the embargo on authorizing women to preach God's word is not just for the congregation in Corinth but for 'all the congregations of the saints.' It is an ecumenical command that holds for all churches all over the world, because it had to do with the ongoing transmission of God's word from the mother church in Jerusalem to Corinth and each new congregation on earth.

Second, the teaching of Paul in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 is part of his written 'charge' to Timothy (1 Tim 1:18; see also 1:5), his brief on what Timothy is to implement within the church in Ephesus. That written charge, which goes from 2:1-3:16, includes the instruction that women are not to teach or exercise authority over a man. That charge does not just give him sound advice on how to best to proceed in dealing with a dysfunctional congregation; it actually tells what 'must' be done 'in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and buttress of the truth' (3:14). The instruction on women in ministry in 2:11-14 is therefore not just a local matter but something that applies to the whole church, the universal church in all times and in all places.

Third, after his claim in 1 Corinthians 14:37 that the decision to prohibit women to be preach God's word to the congregation in the divine service was 'a command of the Lord, he adds this warning in 14:38: 'If anyone does not recognize this, he will not be recognized.' He here addresses those who claim that they should be recognized as preachers because they are prophets or Spirit-filled people who speak in tongues. Now there is more to this warning than meets the eye. It has two sides to it. On the one hand, it decrees that those who do not recognize this as the teaching of Christ will not be recognized as preachers of God's word by Paul and the congregation in Corinth. They will not be allowed to speak in the divine service. On the other hand, it also decrees that if they act as pastors, they will not be recognized by God Himself as speakers of His word either now or in the Last Judgment. Paul indicates this divine dimension by his use of the passive form of the verb to refer to what God will do at the end of the world. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, even though they will be saved on that day, their work, their ministry, will not pass the final assessment. This warning therefore shows that what Paul teaches applies for the whole history of the church.

Thus there is no warrant for assuming that the two passages which do not permit women to be pastors apply are temporary prohibitions. Rather they apply to the whole church for the whole of human history.