

A Local Measure Only?

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John W. Kleinig

The most cogent, scriptural argument for the ordination of women is that in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-38 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 Paul gives instructions that apply only to the churches in Corinth and Ephesus in their particular cultural circumstances. It is held that Paul thereby wanted to dissociate them from women who were pagan priests in these cities because that would hamper the mission of these churches in their context. So, it is argued, these prohibitions do not apply to the whole church at all times and in all places.

Despite its apparent plausibility and immediate appeal, this claim can be readily refuted by a close examination of these texts in their written context. Their context shows that even though they deal with local problems in Corinth and Ephesus, they are not limited in their applicability. Their reach extends to the whole church.

In 1 Corinthians 14:36b-34 Paul teaches that women are not permitted – the verb is divine passive – to speak God’s word in the churches, the assemblies of God’s people. This is part of a broader instruction on the place of prophecy of the divine service and the need for prophecies to be weighed with God’s word as the standard for its authenticity and applicability. He explains the extent of this command by saying that it applies to “all the churches of the saints”. The use of this ecumenical formula makes it clear that this is not just a local or regional requirement. The ecumenical character of the prohibition is reinforced by his claim that he has received it as “a command of the Lord”. The penalty for its rejection by prophets and people who claim to be filled with the Spirit is the withdrawal of God’s recognition of their ministry. Even though it is local in intent, it is also general in its application.

In 1 Timothy Paul makes the same point in a different way. He locates his prohibition of women as teachers in the divine service in his written “charge” to young pastor Timothy for the church in Ephesus in 2:1-3:16. He refers to this “charge” earlier in 1:3, 5, 18, and alludes to it in 3:14-15. This charge does not just deal with organizational, institutional reforms, the things that Timothy needs to implement to ensure the smooth operation of the church in Ephesus. Its aim is “love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1:5). Some would-be teachers had disordered the church spiritually by misapplying God’s word as law and gospel in their teaching which advocated a kind of discarnate gnostic spirituality (4:1-3; 6:20-21). In contrast with their pursuit of higher, spiritual consciousness that transcended life in the body, Timothy is charged to promote what is consistent with the sound teaching of the Christian faith and the possession of a good conscience (1:10, 19).

Paul’s charge to Timothy falls into three parts – measures for congregational prayer by both men and women and for public teaching by men in the divine service in 2:1-16, the right qualifications for bishops as teachers who manage the congregation and for deacons as their

pastoral assistants in 3:1-13, and a general conclusion that explains the purpose of the written charge in 3:14-16. The climax of the charge is hymnic confession of the mystery of true piety in 3:16, the great mystery of Christian spirituality that depends on the hidden presence of the risen Lord Jesus in the church as the mediator between God and humanity (2:5).

In 3:14-15 Paul tells Timothy the purpose of his charge for the church in Ephesus. He says: "I am writing these things for you (singular), so that you may know **how it is necessary to act** in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." Most current translations soften the force of that requirement. They construe the impersonal Greek verb *dei* as a matter of obligation rather than necessity. Thus they translate this phrase as "how one ought to behave," even though they have translated the same verb by "must" earlier in 3:3 and 3:8. Paul here tells Timothy what "must" be done. This is what is necessary for the church in Ephesus to function properly as God's house, the holy temple of the living God.

The church which is founded and grounded on the truth, also upholds the truth, like a central pillar that holds up the ceiling of house. The truth is the truth of salvation through Jesus Christ (2:4), the truth that Paul teaches as his apostle (2:7), the truth that believers know (4:3), the truth that those who have corrupt minds lack (6:5). It is a gift as well as a task, for the church both depends on it for its existence and proclaims it by its existence as a liturgical community. The performance of worship by those who are responsible for it depends on their truthfulness, their conscientious adherence to the truth.

Thus Paul does not regard the things mentioned in his charge as local measures, optional or desirable matters that apply only to the congregation in Ephesus. It is a mandate for it as well as for the whole church. It is what is required for God's whole "house" (3:15) and for those who, like Timothy, are entrusted with its "housekeeping" (1:4; cf. Tit 1:7). This, I maintain, cannot refer to anything else than the universal church, the church catholic. So, like the instruction for the Prayer of the Church in 2:1-10, the reservation of the teaching office for men who are apt teachers is mandatory for the whole church at all times and in all places.

The two passages that have traditionally been used to prevent the service of women as pastors are, by their own testimony, local applications of a general prohibition. They state a binding rule for the whole church.