

# Leading Him Up the Garden Path: Further Thoughts on 1 Timothy 2:11-15

By Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

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Ever since I set forth a more-or-less representative egalitarian interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in *Good News for Women*, I have felt somewhat dissatisfied with this approach. Although I found it considerably less problematic than the traditionalist interpretation, still it left me with some nagging questions. For instance, if women at Ephesus were not to teach or to have authority in the church because they were deceived or unschooled, why were they specifically prohibited only from teaching or having authority over men? And if Paul were addressing women and men in general, why did he speak in terms of “a woman” and “a man”? It has seemed to me that the peculiar wording of the prohibition holds important clues to Paul’s original intent in writing these words to Timothy at Ephesus. I have also suspected that the reference to Adam and Eve is not merely illustrative, but integral to the meaning and purpose of the prohibition. Both the standard egalitarian and traditionalist interpretations fall short of resolving these questions and concerns.

## Problematic Interpretations

Egalitarian interpretations of this text typically argue that Paul was provisionally barring women from teaching and leadership ministries because he did not want them to teach false doctrine or to exercise or usurp authority inappropriately or abusively (e.g., in a dominating or controlling manner).

Presumably, women at this church at this time were not theologically equipped to teach accurately or lead appropriately in the church’s ministries. This interpretation is plausible, but seems to fall short of being persuasive.

Surely not all the women, or only the women, were deceived or unfit to teach or lead. Why, then, should this text restrict the ministry of all women—and of only women? Furthermore, if the women were deceived, uneducated, or otherwise unfit for ministry, they should have been prohibited from teaching or having authority over anyone, not just men. Finally, if Paul were restricting women’s ministry simply as a temporary expedient because of the doctrinal confusion of the Ephesian women, then why, instead of stating this rationale, does he recite the story of Adam and Eve? It all seems a bit cryptic and circuitous.

The supposedly “plain reading” of the text offers no mitigation of difficulties. The usual traditionalist interpretation—that Paul is setting forth a timeless, universal rule that a woman is not to be an elder (or, by extension, a pastor) of a local church—also falls short of the mark. If the statement that a woman is not to teach or have authority over a man is taken at face value, it rules out not only the ministry of pastor or elder for a woman, but also many of the ministries to which women were clearly called and blessed

by God in the Bible. It goes beyond the text's plain meaning to insist that "to teach or to have authority over a man" necessarily, exclusively, and specifically refers to the duties of a pastor or elder.

Why would Paul say a woman must not teach or have authority over "a man" if he meant "the entire church"? A straightforward reading of this text (which traditionalists claim to hold) would seem to permit a female pastor to shepherd the women in a church while a male pastor shepherds the men—thus apportioning the balance of power equally between men and women. Traditionalists would likely object to such a co-pastoring arrangement not simply because it would be awkward to administer, but because it would violate the fundamental principle that they believe is clearly set forth in this text, namely, that God has ordained that in the church a woman must be in submission to the spiritual authority of a man. Yet the text does not plainly read that women are required to submit to male authority.

Traditionalists claim that Paul's appeal to the sequence of Adam and Eve's creation (verse 13) demonstrates that women must be silent and submissive precisely because a hierarchy of male authority was ordained by God at creation. Yet there is nothing in the Genesis account that stipulates such an arrangement, and nothing in the mere temporal priority of the man to demand it.[1]

In order to read Paul's reference to the sequence of creation (vs. 13) as a reference to a creationally-ordained principle of male authority, one must assume that in verse 12 Paul forbids a woman to have authority over a man because God created man to have spiritual authority over woman. Only then does verse 13 appear to read as a statement confirming the divinely ordained authority of man over woman. But this assumption begs the central exegetical question of the text.

In other words, one must first assume universal male authority before one can assert the evidence for universal male authority.

Many traditionalists seek to shore up such question-begging argumentation by claiming that Paul intended verse 13 to be understood in light of the ancient middle-eastern law of primogeniture. In other words, Paul was saying that just as special privileges were granted to the firstborn male in a family, so divine authority has been given to man and not to woman. However, the purpose of primogeniture was to give the firstborn son greater rights of inheritance than his younger brothers, not to give him lifelong authority over the siblings born after him. Therefore, the custom of primogeniture is not analogous to the traditional belief that because the man was "formed first" he has lifelong authority over the woman. Furthermore, the idea that the first is the best is a construction of human culture; it is not a God-given moral principle. Nor was it specifically a law of the Israelites (although Israelite law regulated the conventional practice of primogeniture).[2]

Indeed, Scripture is replete with accounts in which God intentionally overturned the cultural custom of primogeniture in order to accomplish his own purposes. For example, God chose Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Ephraim over Manasseh, the tribe of Judah over that of Reuben the eldest, Joseph over all his older brothers, and David over all his older brothers. As Rushdoony notes, "the exceptions [to

primogeniture] are almost the rule. In the Biblical record, inheritance by primogeniture without moral qualification is rare. Again and again, the firstborn is set aside because of moral failure.”[3] It appears that the practice of primogeniture in the Old Testament offers scant hermeneutical support for a doctrine that insists a woman’s moral qualifications for spiritual leadership can *never* overrule the fact that she was not born a man.

In addition to these and other exegetical and theological problems with using primogeniture to establish male authority at creation, there is a logical problem. The logic of the argument forms a series of assertions, each one serving as a premise for the assertion that follows. But notice that the argument is circular; the conclusion merely rephrases the initial premise. 1) Primogeniture is the key to interpreting Paul’s divinely-inspired reference to the sequence of creation. 2) Therefore, being formed first entails a certain God-ordained superiority or privilege. 3) Therefore, 1 Timothy 2:13 states that men have authority over women because man was created prior to woman. 4) Therefore, God ordained male authority in the pre-fall Garden. 5) Therefore, primogeniture explains God’s intent in forming Adam first, then Eve.

To put the problem less formally: Unless you can get God-ordained superiority out of being formed first, you cannot derive a universal principle of male authority from 1 Timothy 2:12-13; so you must invoke primogeniture as the divinely-inspired way to interpret the sequence of God’s creation. Unless you can derive a universal, creational principle of male authority from this text (through invoking primogeniture), you cannot get male authority from the Genesis account of creation. Unless you have male authority in the pre-fall Garden, you have no reason to believe that when “Adam was formed first, then Eve,” God intended this to be understood in terms of the “first is best” principle of primogeniture.[4]

The case for God-ordained male authority from the creation order is a circular argument, in which divine endorsement of the culture-bound construct of primogeniture serves as both premise and conclusion—without clear biblical warrant. But primogeniture itself assumes patriarchy (it being an integral feature of the ancient patriarchal social order), so to invoke primogeniture to prove patriarchy creates another circular argument. It seems 1 Timothy 2:13 does not serve as compelling proof that Paul is mandating female subordination to male authority as a timeless creation ordinance.

Moreover, if Paul *were* forbidding women to teach or lead men because of a creationally ordained principle of male authority, there would be no reason to limit the purview of this principle to the leadership of the local church. It should rather be operative in every area of human endeavor throughout all of God’s kingdom and creation. (The church did not even exist in the Garden!) Yet traditionalists commonly hold that this passage mandates male rule only in the local church, thus permitting women to teach and perhaps even to have authority over men in other contexts (although they disagree as to which contexts are permissible).

Further problems ensue from the traditionalist understanding of verse 14. If the fact that Eve was deceived serves as a reason to bar all women for all time from teaching or having authority over men, then what is the causal connection? Is it because Eve’s

deception indicates a universal female propensity for being deceived (the historical, traditional view of this verse)? If so, then why should women be forbidden only to teach men and not also women and children (who, presumably, would be even more likely than men to be led astray by false teaching)?

Even when traditionalists reject the historically traditional interpretation of verse 14, they often do not cease to insist that the reference to Eve's deception is somehow a reference to why women are innately unfit for pastoral ministry. The efforts of Thomas Schreiner and Daniel Doriani provide a case in point.[5] They claim that verse 14 does not mean women are intellectually deficient or less capable of discerning doctrinal error; rather, because of the "gentler and kinder" inclinations of the female nature, women are more likely than men to overlook deception in others and less likely to take a stand for doctrinal truth. This, then, disqualifies women from authoritative church teaching but not from all teaching.

However, if the intent of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is to bar from church leadership those whose gender inclines them to tolerate deception and heresy, and if (as these men assert) the transgressions of the first man and woman indicate the different proclivities of men and women in general, then it is men, not women, who should be denied positions of church leadership. Tolerating deception in another is precisely what Adam did, not Eve. Adam sinned in going along with woman's doctrinal error and failing to stand for what he knew directly from God to be true. It was the man, not the woman, who did the very thing a church leader must not do: he overlooked deception and declined to judge the error of someone whose favor he wanted to retain. Exemplifying what Doriani and Schreiner regard as typically "female" behavior, the first man chose relational harmony over doctrinal purity—and the entire human race was plunged into sin and alienation from God.

Although Doriani and Schreiner deny that their rationale entails women's intellectual inferiority, there can be no denying that a *moral* deficiency is evident in one who sees error in the church and fails to exercise responsibility to take a stand for the truth. If such behavior does, in fact, occur naturally in women—or if for any reason Eve's moral failing should be regarded as typifying women in general—then women are, by virtue of their female nature, morally and spiritually defective (despite oft-heard traditionalist protestations to the contrary).

### **A New Look at the Text**

In light of these various difficulties and unanswered questions, Paul's use of the Genesis story to support and clarify his prohibition deserves fresh scrutiny. I am persuaded that we cannot understand what Paul was prohibiting and why he was prohibiting it unless we can grasp the sense in which he saw the Genesis account as applicable to the situation he was addressing. As I have pondered this, it has seemed to me that the story of the first woman and man in verses 13 and 14 serves to delineate the meaning and purpose of the instructions regarding woman and man in verses 11 and 12. The thing that happened between Adam and Eve in the Garden is the very thing that Paul

wants to keep from happening with respect to the men and women in the church at Ephesus.

As Paul looks at the situation in Ephesus, where false teachers have been deceiving women into believing a twisted understanding of God's word (see 1 Tim 1:3-7; 5:11-15, 2 Tim 3:6-7), he sees a potential replaying of the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. Eve submitted to satanic instruction concerning God's word and then prevailed upon Adam to go along with the false view of God's word that she had heard from the serpent. A woman must not do as Eve did, Paul declares. Rather, she must submit to instruction in true doctrine.

In the preceding verses (1 Timothy 2:8-10), Paul had been discussing behavior appropriate for "men" and "women;" then in verse 11 he begins talking about "a woman" and "a man." This continues until the middle of verse 15, when he switches from the singular "she" (i.e., Eve) back to the plural "they" (i.e., women in the church at Ephesus). It seems that Paul speaks of "a woman" and "a man" in verses 11 and 12 because he is thinking in terms of the story of the first woman and man, which he proceeds to recount in verses 13 and 14.[6]

Some of the women in the church at Ephesus (like Eve) were being deceived, and (like Eve) may also have been persuading some of the men to accept the false doctrine. Paul's point in verse 12 is that he doesn't want the women in the Ephesian church to follow the fatal error of Eve. *This* is the behavior that Paul will "not permit."

Even if Ephesian women were not actually teaching men at this time, there evidently was imminent danger of deceived women leading men into heresy. Paul's warning to the women at Ephesus not to do to a man what Eve did to Adam would be apropos even if these women had not been teaching men in the church. (Indeed, there is no explicit evidence that women were in such positions.) After all, Eve had no position of teaching authority, yet she exercised a powerful—and damaging—influence on Adam. Paul's concern is that deceived women at Ephesus not do likewise.

Because Paul sees the Ephesian situation as reminiscent of the fall of Adam and Eve, he retells the story of the first man and woman in light of the men and women at Ephesus. The entire passage (2:11-15) consists of one integral, unitary thought, wherein Paul's instructions concerning "a woman" and "a man" connect with and collapse into his recalling and recounting of the story of the first woman and man.

As he plays out the analogy between Adam and Eve and the men and women at Ephesus, Paul seems to be flipping back and forth in his mind between the two situations. Thus his argument proceeds rather elliptically (but not illogically). We should bear in mind that arguments do not necessarily flow in a perfectly direct and linear fashion. A point that is made later may be pivotal to understanding a point presented previously. Paul often digresses in his letters (writing as he did without benefit of word processor). It is not implausible that, after stating his specific instructions (vs. 11-12), he should proceed to elucidate the context and substance of these instructions (vs. 13-14). The Genesis story serves as the *context* in the sense that it is the conceptual frame of reference according to which Paul perceives and addresses the situation at Ephesus. It is the *substance* in the sense that the error of Eve is what he seeks to prevent or remedy with

respect to the women at Ephesus.

If, indeed, the instructions in verses 11 and 12 are given with a view to the events described in verses 13 and 14, then perhaps we can perceive Paul's line of thought more clearly if we also look at these verses in reverse order: Eve was deceived and led Adam to join her in sinning against God. Adam, however, was not deceived by the serpent; having been formed first, he (we may surmise) had become sufficiently familiar with God's word to know full well that the serpent's message was wrong.[7] A woman must not do what Eve did, which was to induce a man to accept and act upon false teaching concerning God's word; rather, a woman should submit to instruction in true doctrine from sound teachers.

Paul's reference to "the childbearing" in verse 15 seems to evoke the promise of redemption God gave to Eve in Genesis 3:15. While the woman Eve was deceived by Satan when she failed to submit to God's true word, the woman Mary heard and believed the word of the Lord to her, and so through her the Christ child was brought into the world. Thus Paul concludes his stern warnings regarding Eve and the Ephesian women on a more positive, encouraging note.

Typically, both traditionalists and egalitarians approach this text with the understanding that in verse 12 Paul is prohibiting women from holding some sort of teaching or leadership position in the church. Each camp then interprets verses 13 and 14 according to what each believes to be the scope of the prohibition in verse 12. Traditionalists say the scope is transcultural, and so interpret verses 13 and 14 as providing the timeless, creationally-ordained rationale for the prohibition. Egalitarians say the scope is temporally and culturally limited, and so interpret verses 13 and 14 as illustrating why the prohibition was relevant for the church at Ephesus. In neither approach does Paul's recounting of the Genesis story elucidate the sense and substance of the prohibition. Rather, verses 13 and 14 are seen as supporting the directives set forth in verses 11 and 12, the meaning of which is deemed apparent quite apart from the recitation of the Genesis story that follows.

I suggest we set aside the assumption that verses 13 and 14 simply reinforce (in some sense) a prohibition against women's participation in some or all of the church's ruling and teaching ministries (whether locally or transculturally). Instead, let us allow Paul's remarks concerning Adam and Eve in verses 13 and 14 to inform our understanding of what Paul is requiring in verses 11 and 12. Accordingly, we see the Adam and Eve story not as merely illustrating the reason for the prohibition, but as signifying the very behavior that is prohibited: a woman must not do as Eve did, namely, lead a man to accept false teaching.

An understanding of the prohibition as forbidding a woman to do to a man what Eve did to Adam accounts for the use of *authentēin* here. The term does not refer to having or exercising authority in the ordinary way (as it is typically rendered in modern translations), but rather to influencing or prevailing upon someone to go along with a specific agenda or engage in a particular activity. Andrew Perriman's study of *authentēin* yields a similar conclusion. Following his view of *authentēo* as having "more to do with 'authorship' than with 'authority,'" he goes on to argue "that the use of the curious word

*authentēin* here presupposes in a quite specific way the story of Adam and Eve as it is told in verses 13-14.”[8] In that “Eve ‘took the initiative’ or ‘exerted influence’ in causing Adam also to sin,” she acted as “an instigator or perpetrator in the fall.”[9]

So when Paul wrote *oude authentēin andros* [‘nor to have authority over a man’] . . . he was thinking specifically of what Eve did to Adam; and Eve did not *have* authority, but *in her action became* responsible for—became the cause of—Adam’s transgression. She exerted an influence over him in a particular situation and as a result he also sinned. In the overlapping of the two contexts—that of the scriptural ‘type’ and that of the contemporary situation at Ephesus—*authentēin* refers both to what Eve once did by persuading Adam to eat and to what women now should not do by exercising a damaging teaching role.[10]

Further, the use of *authentēin* qualifies the kind of teaching that is prohibited. As Linda Belleville notes, the clauses “to teach” and “*authentēin* a man” are linked by the “neither/nor” (*ouk/oude*) construction of verse 12. In biblical Greek, this correlative construction is a literary device that pairs related or similar ideas.[11] There are several different ways in which “neither/nor” ideas can be correlated in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 2:12 the conceptual relationship appears to be that of defining a related purpose or goal. A similar usage is found in Matthew 6:20, “where thieves neither break in nor steal” (which is to say, break in *so that they may steal*).[12] Putting all this together, we may conclude that Paul does not permit a woman to instruct a man in such a way that she persuades or prevails upon—and, in a sense, causes—him to disobey God’s word (as Eve did with respect to Adam).[13]

Although Paul’s prohibition relates to women’s conduct in the church body, it need not pertain directly or exclusively to women functioning in a particular church office or ministry. In the spirit of the preceding exhortations in 1 Timothy, which focus on keeping the faith, proper demeanor in prayer, and general godly behavior, Paul’s concern in 2:11-15 appears to be with the process whereby a person becomes deceived into believing a satanically twisted view of God’s word and then proceeds to teach this view to another, thereby leading the other into disobedience to God. This is what Eve did to Adam. This is evidently what some women were doing (or were in danger of doing) to some of the men in the church at Ephesus. And this is what Paul will not permit.

The exhortation not to be deceived or to lead others to accept false doctrine is, in principle, applicable to anyone. In chapter one of 1 Timothy, Paul indicates his disapproval and suppression of men who had been teaching the church false doctrine. In 2 Corinthians 11:3, Paul warns both men and women in the church not to be led astray by the sort of deception into which Eve had fallen. In 1 Timothy 2:12 the prohibition is directed specifically against a woman leading a man into false doctrine because it arises out of Paul’s concern that the church at Ephesus might be replaying the tragic roles of the first woman and man. Although the sin of Eve is not characteristic of women in general,

it seems it was a particular problem for a number of the women at Ephesus.

## In Conclusion

The story of Adam and Eve appears to be the lens through which Paul perceives and prescribes the remedy for the deception of women in the church at Ephesus. He states his case in terms that are somewhat allusive, elliptical and analogical, because his words regarding the women and men at Ephesus flow out of the picture in his mind of what happened long ago between the first woman and man in the Garden of Eden.

Thus, Paul does not bar women from ministries that involve teaching and/or having authority over men (whether locally or universally). Rather, when Paul says that a woman must neither teach nor *authentain* a man, he has in mind what the first woman did to the first man. It is the repetition of the error of Eve that Paul disallows, not a woman's faithful exercise of her teaching and leadership gifts in the church body.[14]

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## Endnotes

[1] See chapter five of my *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997).

[2] I owe several of the above insights to Richard S. Hess.

[3] Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1973), 182.

[4] Some traditionalists argue that divinely ordained male authority is apparent from the Genesis creation account because the ancient middle-eastern mind would have understood the creation account in terms of the law of primogeniture. This does not follow. Even if the Genesis account would have been seen in this light (which is doubtful, given that the parallel between male authority and primogeniture is fallacious), the issue is divine intent as to creation order, not the assumptions and proclivities of the ancient middle-eastern mind. For an example of such reasoning, see Thomas Schreiner in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed. James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 203. For additional discussion of the primogeniture argument, see my *Good News for Women*, 219-221.

[5] Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas Schreiner, H. Scott Baldwin, eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 145-46, 262-67.

[6] Andrew Perriman (*Speaking of Women: Interpreting Paul* [Leicester, England: Apollos/Inter-Varsity Press, 1998], 164 n64) also sees in this text the “strong impression . . . that in changing from the plural in verses 8-10 to the singular in verses 11-12 Paul has adapted his argument to the terms of the Genesis narrative.”

[7] Or, perhaps Paul's “first Adam, then Eve” comment has no particular meaning other than to begin the story at the beginning, before moving on to the main point in verse 14. Interestingly, traditionalists see verse 13 as presenting the main point, and then have difficulty figuring out what to make of verse 14. See discussion in my *Good News for Women*, 222-224.

[8] Perriman, 156, 161.

[9] Ibid., 169, 171.

[10] Ibid., 169-170; emphasis in original. Perriman's remarks should be qualified by the observation that, although Adam sinned consequent upon Eve's initiation and influence, Adam's sin was nonetheless his own act and his own responsibility.

[11] Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 176.

[12] Ibid., 177.

[13] It should be noted that neither Perriman nor Belleville hold exactly the view that I am proposing here. I am drawing on Perriman's study of *authentēin* and Belleville's study of *ouk/oude* constructions to support an interpretation of this text that I arrived at before either Perriman's or Belleville's exegetical work had been published. I did, however, "steal" the title of this essay from Perriman's chapter on 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

[14] I am grateful to Douglas Groothuis, Alan Padgett, Craig Keener, I. Howard Marshall and Linda Belleville for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

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