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1: God's high calling for women

1 Timothy 2:9

The debate over the role of women in the church has reached massive proportions. Feminist philosophy has penetrated almost every area of our society and has made significant inroads into the church. I am amazed at how many evangelical churches, colleges, and seminaries have abandoned biblical truths they previously held since their foundations. People have written books affirming new “truth” regarding the role of women in the church. Scholars have reinterpreted Scripture passages teaching the traditional roles of men and women. Some say these passages

should be ignored altogether because they reflect the apostle Paul's antifemale bias. Others claim these passages were added by later editors and do not reflect the intent of the original author. The church, the foundation of the truth of God, is falling fast to the march of the feminist army.

The effort to overthrow the design of God for men and women is ultimately not a human effort. It is the effort of the archenemy of God, Satan, who uses sinful human agents to attain his goals. That's why the controversy over the role of women in the church is so tragic: the church is being deceived by the lies of Satan and is actually becoming a part of his attack. God has specific roles for men and women in society, the family, and the church that are clear in Scripture. We need to reaffirm them.

In approaching this subject, I could take a lot of time demonstrating how far-reaching feminism is. I could provide many quotes, and we could look at all kinds of incidents. We could discuss at length the schools, seminaries, and books that illustrate how pervasive the feminist movement's influence on the church has been. However, we're all aware of those influences. It seems to me most helpful to simply look at the Word of God. If we understand what the Bible says, we will be able to deal with any error we might

face. There is no passage more direct and comprehensive in addressing the role of women in the church than 1 Timothy 2:9–15.

First Timothy is a letter from the apostle Paul to his son in the faith, his friend and co-laborer Timothy. Paul and Timothy had met several years before the writing of this epistle, during Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–5). When this letter was written, Paul had concluded his three missionary journeys and had just been released from his first imprisonment in Rome. After leaving prison, Paul met Timothy in Ephesus.

Timothy was pastor of the Ephesian church. Apparently word had reached Paul that things in Ephesus were not as they should be. Paul had spent three years of his ministry in Ephesus and had poured his soul into that church. In Acts 20 Paul said to the Ephesian elders that he had not failed to declare the entire Word of God to the church but had warned them night and day for three years that error would come from the outside and that evil would rise from the inside (vv. 27–31). Unfortunately, his worst fears had come to pass: the church at Ephesus had fallen into doctrinal error and ungodly patterns of living. Most significant, the leadership had been corrupted and needed to be replaced by godly leaders.

Paul met Timothy in Ephesus and personally dealt with two of the corrupt leaders, Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20). When Paul left for further ministry to the west, he left Timothy behind at Ephesus to straighten out the rest of the problems. Paul had been gone only a few weeks when he wrote this letter to Timothy to encourage him and give him direction for his ministry. First Timothy 3:14–15 gives the overall intent of the letter: “These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” First Timothy was written to set the church in order.

One of the problem areas in the church at Ephesus was the role of women. Since the leaders of the church had fallen into doctrinal and moral error, it's not surprising that there was a negative impact on the women as well as the men. First Timothy 5:6 tells us that some women had abandoned their purity and were living only for pleasure. Some younger widows had made promises to Christ to remain single, but they were in danger of violating them because of lust, bringing condemnation upon themselves (vv. 11–12). Some had become idle, moving from house to house.

Others were becoming gossipers and busybodies (v. 13). Some had already turned aside to follow Satan (v. 15). In 2 Timothy 3:6 Paul refers to these women as gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, making them easy prey for false teachers.

First Timothy 2 focuses on another problem involving women. Under the pretense of coming to worship God, certain women were flaunting their beauty and desecrating the worship service. Their dress and demeanor betrayed an evil intent rather than a heart of worship.

Worship is central to the church. It is not surprising that Paul discusses it early in his letter. In fact, it is the second topic he deals with in chapter 2, where he begins discussing problems in the church. The worship services at Ephesus were polluted by women who saw an opportunity to flaunt their wealth and beauty. Their sexual allure was drawing the focus away from the worship service. From his discussion of the problems women were causing in the worship services, Paul branched out into a discussion of the biblical role of women. In verse 9, we encounter the first of six essential aspects to God's high calling for women.

THE APPEARANCE OF WOMEN (v. 9 a, c)

“In like manner, also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel . . . not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing.”

The phrase “in like manner” refers back to verse 8. It introduces a new subject, but one related to the previous topic. Paul now moves to a new topic within the overall subject of how men and women should conduct themselves in worship gatherings. “In like manner” serves as a transition between different topics within a broader discussion. It is used in 1 Timothy 3:8 to make a transition from the topic of elders to that of deacons, and in verse 11 between deacons and deaconesses, all within the general subject of church leadership. Paul now moves from discussing the attitude of men in the worship service (v. 8) to that of women (vv. 9–15).

The General Pattern

The Greek word translated “will” in verse 8 (κῆν) (*boulomai*) refers to intent, purpose, determination, or command, in contrast to *thelō*, which indicates a wish. It could be translated “I command.” It carries apostolic intent and divine authority. Paul is com-

manding men to pray and women to adorn themselves in a proper manner.

The next key word “adorn,” from the Greek *kosmeō*, means “to arrange” or “to put in order.” Paul is saying women should prepare themselves for worship. The Greek word translated “modest” (*kosmios*), the adjectival form of *kosmeō*, means “well-ordered” or “well-arranged.”

Third, the Greek word translated “apparel” in the *New King James Version* does not refer only to clothing but can mean “demeanor” or “attitude.” It encompasses a woman’s total preparation for worship, involving both the attitude of the heart and proper adornment on the outside. Her clothing should reflect a heart focused on God.

The Specific Problems

Paul not only gives a general exhortation about women’s appearance, but he also deals with some specific issues that were problems in Ephesus.

One specific problem was the attempt by some women *to imitate the values of their surrounding culture*. Several ancient writers have described how women dressed in the Roman culture of Paul’s day, which no doubt influenced the church at Ephesus.

The writings of Juvenal, a first-century Roman

satirical poet, portray everyday life in the Roman Empire. In his sixth satire he describes women who are preoccupied with their appearance: "There is nothing that a woman will not permit herself to do, nothing that she deems shameful, and when she encircles her neck with green emeralds and fastens huge pearls to her elongated ears, so important is the business of beautification; so numerous are the tiers and stories piled one another on her head! In the meantime she pays no attention to her husband!"

First-century Roman historian Pliny the Elder told of Lollia Paulina, one-time wife of the Roman Emperor Caligula, who owned a dress worth more than a million dollars by today's standards. It was covered with emeralds and pearls, and Lollia carried receipts with her proving its value (*Natural History* 9.58).

However, in contrast to Roman society, the mystery religions of Greece had stringent rules about the appearance of women. One inscription illustrates their concern: "A consecrated woman shall not have gold ornaments, nor rouge, nor face whitening, nor a head-band, nor braided hair, nor shoes, except those made of felt or of the skins of sacrificed animals" (cited in William Barclay's *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 67–68).

Both Paul and Timothy were concerned that the Ephesian church would be a godly testimony to society. For the women of the church to imitate the gaudy clothing styles of pagan women, to call attention to themselves, or to dress to entice men into illicit sexual relationships was to blaspheme the intent of the worship service.

A second specific problem was the desire by some women *to flaunt their wealth*. In the first century, poverty was widespread. The wealthy could dress in a style that was impossible for the poor to match. Today, good clothing is relatively affordable in Western society. But in New Testament times, a dress worn by a wealthy woman could cost up to 7,000 denarii (since one denarius equaled a day's wage for the average laborer, this was the equivalent of more than 19 years of an average laborer's salary). When a wealthy woman entered the worship service wearing an expensive dress, she caused a sensation that disrupted the service.

In addition to expensive clothing, rich women also displayed their wealth through elaborate hairstyles woven with expensive jewels (which is the meaning of "braided hair" in v. 9). They also wore gold rings and earrings and hung gold on their sandals and dresses.

In his work *The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel*, the

first-century Jewish philosopher Philo described a prostitute. He portrayed her as wearing many gold chains and bracelets, with her hair done up in elaborate and gaudy braids. Her eyes were marked with pencil lines, her eyebrows smothered in paint. She wore expensive clothes embroidered lavishly with flowers.

Notice that the Bible does not forbid women to braid their hair or to own gold, pearls, and fine clothes. Both the bride of Solomon (Song of Sol. 1:10) and the woman described in Proverbs 31:22 owned expensive apparel. There is an appropriate time and place for that, as affirmed by the words of Isaiah 61:10: "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (NASB).

But jewelry was (and is) often used as a way of flaunting a woman's wealth or calling attention to herself in an unwholesome way. It is that preoccupation which Paul forbids in the place of worship. When a woman dresses for the worship service to attract attention to herself, she has violated the purpose of worship (1 Peter 3:3-4).

After preaching a sermon years ago, I walked out the door of the sanctuary and was approached by a woman who was not appropriately dressed for church. She handed me an expensive piece of jewelry, a gold chain, and a note soliciting me. That is an overt example, but there are many more subtle solicitations that go on in the church. Anyone who doesn't realize this has his or her head in the sand. Look at the many pastors who fall prey to sexual sin and the many churches that have to deal with immorality and the results of pornography. That is one of the reasons for Paul's strong words in 1 Timothy 2:9–10.

John Chrysostom, a fourth-century church Father, wrote this in his homily on 1 Timothy concerning the importance of women's dressing modestly for the worship service: "What is this 'modest apparel'? Such attire as covers them completely, and decently, and not with superfluous ornaments for the one is becoming, the other is not. What? Dost thou approach God to pray with broidered hair and ornaments of gold? Art thou come to a dance? to a marriage? to a gay [humorous] procession? There such . . . costly garments, had been seasonable; here not one of them is wanted. Thou art come to pray, to supplicate for pardon of thy sins, to plead for thine offenses, beseeching the Lord, and hoping to render Him propitious to thee. . . .

Away with such hypocrisy!”

The church is a place for worship, not a show. It bothers me when I see people who claim to be Christians preoccupied with their appearance. Whenever people use the worship service to call attention to themselves, it brings great tragedy to the church.

The Proper Motives

A Christian wife should attract attention to her godly character, not to her clothing. She should show by her dress and demeanor her love and devotion to her husband. She should demonstrate a humble heart committed to worshipping God.

Likewise, single women should realize that the worship service isn't the place to try to attract men. They too should understand it is more important that someone be attracted to their godly character rather than to their outward appearance.

How can both married and single women know that they are dressed properly for the worship service? By examining their motives. A woman should ask herself, *Why am I dressed the way I am? What is my goal? Am I trying to draw attention to God or to myself? Will what I'm wearing stand out, or will it be considered appropriate for the occasion?*

First Peter 3:3-4 is a parallel passage to 1 Timothy

2:9–10. Peter writes, “Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.” Like Paul, Peter emphasized that a woman is not to be preoccupied with what she wears but with who she is.

THE ATTITUDE OF WOMEN (v. 9b)

“With godly fear and sobriety.”

Godly Fear

The Greek word translated “godly fear” (*aidōs*) refers to modesty mixed with humility. It connotes a sense of shame—not shame in being a woman but shame in inciting lust or distracting others from proper worship of God. A woman with a proper sense of shame will not dress to be a source of temptation. *Aidōs* implies morally rejecting anything dishonorable to God. A woman who is grieved over the possibility of offending God will not do anything to cause someone to stumble.

A godly woman hates sin so much that she would avoid anything that would engender sin in anyone.

This is certainly consistent with the words of our Lord, who said,

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! . . . See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 18:6–7, 10 NASB)

Self-Control

“Sobriety” (Gk., *sōphrosunē*) is better translated “self-control.” In extra-biblical literature, *sōphrosunē* is used to speak of totally controlling one’s sexual passions and desires. The Greeks valued this virtue highly. Euripides called it “the fairest gift of the gods” (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 4:224). In *The Republic*, Plato says it is one of the four cardinal virtues.

There are dangers to failing to exercise self-control, both to the leaders of the church and to the

congregations to which Paul writes. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul says that both elders and deacons in the church must be “the husband of one wife” (vv. 2, 12). That phrase can be literally translated as “a one-woman man.” A man in a leadership role in the church must be totally devoted to his wife. I believe one of the major problems at Ephesus was that the men were not faithful to their wives. Satan attacked the church by bringing alluring women into the church to seduce the men. He continues to do so today.

Congregations are similarly affected by failing to exercise self-control. For example, in the situation of the Ephesian church in 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul stresses the importance of younger widows remarrying. Paul knew that single women with strong desires for marriage were a potential danger to the purity of the church. And that's true in our day, too.

The point of all this is obvious. The church can be a place where worship happens, or the church can be a place devoted wholeheartedly to people putting on a show. This is what so deeply bothers me when I see Christian television and find people who say they represent Christianity, people who claim to be workers and servants of the Lord, who betray an absolutely consuming preoccupation with their own appearance. It's the antithesis of everything they claim, and cer-

tainly should not mark the church. But there were some self-centered women who were using the occasion of the church meeting together to call attention to themselves, flaunt their beauty, flaunt their wealth, their attractiveness before men because they lacked humility, meekness, and modesty and control over their own desires. This brings great tragedy to the church.

In Titus 2:4–5 Paul instructs Titus regarding the congregation at Crete that older women are to teach young women “to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the Word of God be not blasphemed” (KJV). Instead of doing good, some women were causing problems in the congregation.

Another example can be found in the congregation at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul rebukes the Corinthians for tolerating a situation involving sexual sin. The sexual sin was a form of incest: a man having an affair with his father's wife (his stepmother). Instead of mourning over that sin, the Corinthians were boasting about it (v. 2). According to 1 Corinthians 6:13, they attempted to justify it by quoting what was perhaps a common Greek proverb: “Foods for the body and the body for foods.” That is to say that sex,

like eating, is merely a biological function. But Paul warned the Corinthians to flee from sexual sin (v. 18). I believe that the problem concerning women with improper motives plagued the church at Corinth as well as the churches in Ephesus and Crete.

Failure to exercise self-control has its consequences and leads to judgment. In Isaiah 3:16-26 God pronounces judgment on women who dress to draw attention to themselves:

Moreover the Lord says:

“Because the daughters of Zion are haughty,
And walk with outstretched necks
And wanton eyes,
Walking and mincing as they go,
Making a jingling with their feet,
Therefore the Lord will strike with a scab
The crown of the head of the daughters of Zion,
And the Lord will uncover their secret parts.”
In that day the Lord will take away the finery:
The jingling anklets, the scarves, and the crescents;
The pendants, the bracelets, and the veils;
The headdresses, the leg ornaments, and the headbands;
The perfume boxes, the charms, and the rings;
The nose jewels, the festal apparel, and the mantles;

The outer garments, the purses, and the mirrors;
The fine linen, the turbans, and the robes.

And so it shall be:

Instead of a sweet smell there will be a stench;
Instead of a sash, a rope;
Instead of well-set hair, baldness;
Instead of a rich robe, a girding of sackcloth;
And branding instead of beauty.
Your men shall fall by the sword,
And your mighty in the war.
Her gates shall lament and mourn,
And she being desolate shall sit on the ground.

Wearing jewelry or expensive clothing is not evil,
but wearing them for evil purposes is. Clothing that
reflects impure motives has no place in the church.

Review

1. Who is behind the attack on the God-designed roles for men and women?
2. Describe the circumstances that prompted Paul to write 1 Timothy.
3. What was Paul's main purpose in writing 1 Timothy (3:14-15)?
4. What were some of the problems involving the women in the Ephesian church?
5. What is the significance of the phrase "in like manner" in verse 9?
6. Describe the cultural setting in which the Ephesian church found itself regarding women's clothing.
7. True or false: According to the Bible, it is always wrong for women to wear expensive jewelry and clothes.
8. How can a woman know if she is properly dressed to attend the worship service?
9. A woman is not to be preoccupied with _____ but _____ .

10. What should be a woman's attitude toward distracting someone from worshiping God?
11. Why might Paul have included "husband of one wife" as one of the qualifications for church leaders?
12. How did the Corinthians defend their toleration of sexual sin (cf. 1 Cor. 6:18)?
13. What is Paul's counsel on how to avoid sexual sin (cf. 1 Cor. 6:18)?

Reflect

1. First Timothy 2:9 stresses the importance of preparing for the worship service. When you go to church, the issue is not just how well prepared the preacher and the musicians are but how well you are prepared to worship God. As you prepare for the worship service, ask yourself: *Am I sincere? Is my attention focused on God? Am I coming to worship God knowing His acceptance of me is based solely on what Christ has done for me? Am I coming with a pure heart, having dealt with any sin in my life? Am I coming to be a spectator or a participant?*

2. Although 1 Timothy 2:9 teaches the importance of women's attitudes and dress in preventing sexual sin, men also have a responsibility. In 2 Timothy 2:22 Paul instructs Timothy to flee from lust. Men, when you see a provocatively dressed woman (in or out of the worship service), what is your reaction? Do you stare? Or can you say with Job, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman" (Job 31:1)? Are you obeying Paul's command to flee from sexual sin, or are you courting it by reading books, looking at magazines, watching TV programs and movies, or viewing Internet sites that you know are wrong? Memorize Job 31:1, 1 Corinthians 6:18, and 2 Timothy 2:22. Then put their teaching into practice by making yourself accountable to a spiritually mature brother in Christ for your thought life and your reading and viewing habits.