

“Woman not to teach man” or “Wife not to teach husband”?

-- On the translation of I Timothy 2:11-15

[Leonard Li](#)

I. Introduction

The interpretation of I Timothy 2:12 affects the ministry of the word by women in the Christian church. Biblical scholars have different views, but most of them translate this verse as “*I do not allow a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; ...*”. This is reflected in most English translations today.^[1]

But such a translation, however interpreted, leads to a problem in the Christian church, namely women are not allowed to teach men, much less being professors or lecturers in seminaries, or pastors or ministers in churches. Furthermore, if teachings by women are recorded into audio or video formats, are they to be listened to or viewed by women only?

Dr. Timothy Lin, when he was the president of the China Evangelical Seminary in Taiwan, did point out that “I Tim. 2:11-15 addresses women’s conduct in the family, not their ministries in the church.”^[2] However, due to space limitations, Dr. Lin did not elaborate on the exegesis of this passage.

In this article, the author would like to propose a translation, basically following the translation of Ephesians 5:22-33, by rendering all “woman/man” in the passage as “wife/husband”, and to provide some discussions. Such a translation seems to resolve the issue of women serving in the ministry of the word. In addition, from an exegetical point of view, it seems to elucidate Apostle Paul’s original intention, as it is consistent with Paul’s teachings in his other epistles.

II. The Division of I Timothy 2:8-15

From the content of Chapter 2 of I Timothy, it is without doubt that 2:8 to 2:15 forms a complete unit. Next, it is also without question that within this unit, 2:8-10 contains general teachings to believers, because 2:10 clearly states how godly women should conduct themselves. Finally, it is clear that 2:15 contains specific teachings for married women, because this verse refers to childbearing.

Therefore, it is clear that 2:8-15 is a complete unit, and Paul’s teachings proceed from general principles (men/women, 2:8-10) to specific teachings (childbearing 2:15). The question, however, is whether 2:11-14 should belong to the preceding general principles (concerning all believers) or the following specific principles (concerning Christian wives).

^[1] As in the following translations:

NASU -- New American Standard Bible (1995 Update, <http://www.biblegateway.com>)

ESV -- English Standard Version (2011 Update, www.ESV.org)

NET -- New English Translation (2004, netbible.org)

NIV -- New International Version (2011 Update, <http://www.biblegateway.com>)

^[2] Timothy Lin, “*I do not allow woman to preach, Yes or No?*”, China Evangelical Seminary Newsletter, 1986/5/5 (in Chinese)

Most biblical scholars tend to consider 2:11-14 as general principles. However, through detailed analysis, we will find that it is more reasonable to interpret 2:11-14 as specific principles (concerning Christian wives) when we consider the following aspects:

1. **“Woman/man” may be translated as “wife/husband”:**

In Greek, the same word “*gynē*” is used for either “woman” or “wife”. Similarly, the same word “*anēr*” is used for either “man” or “husband”. In the NT, Ephesians 5:22-33 and Colossians 3:18-19 are the two prominent passages where “*gynē/anēr*” are translated as “wife/husband” without exception. Furthermore, the teachings in those two passages are quite consistent with the teachings in I Tim. 2:11-15. Therefore such a translation for I Tim. 2:11-15 is consistent with the principles of exegesis.

2. **The teachings about submission in I Tim. 2:11 is consistent with that in other NT passages:**

In the NT, whenever it teaches about woman submitting (*hypotassō*) to man, it always refers to wife submitting to husband (Eph. 5:22-33, Col. 3:18-19, I Cor. 14:34-35, and I Peter 3:1-5).

In addition, the teaching about women covering their heads in I Cor. 11:3-16 mainly refers to the conduct of women in church meetings, and does not refer to submission.^[3] Furthermore, I Cor. 11:3-16 is a specific teaching to the Corinthian church, because what Paul said about men covering their heads (I Cor. 11:4) cannot be a general teaching, since priests in the OT wore turbans (Exodus 28:4, 28:39-40).

3. **I Tim. 2:12 as a general principle would be inconsistent with other biblical passages:**

If I Tim. 2:12 is interpreted as a general principle, and therefore sisters cannot teach brothers, then a mother cannot teach her son, much less an adult son who is a king. This would be inconsistent with what is recorded in the bible (Prov. 31:1-3).

In I Cor. 11:4-5 Paul made explicitly parallel statements about brothers and sisters praying and prophesying in meetings, the only difference being that sisters need to cover their heads. Therefore if I Tim. 2:12 is interpreted as that sisters are not allowed to teach brothers, then that would be inconsistent with what Paul said to the Corinthian church.

4. **I Tim. 2:11-15 can be a separate section:**

The “women/men” in I Tim. 2:8-10 are plural, but the “woman/man” in I Tim. 2:11-14 are singular and can be translated as “wife/husband”. Although this is not an absolute evidence that I Tim. 2:11 begins a separate section, it can still be said that such a division is not completely without basis.

5. **I Tim. 2:11-15 refers to husband-wife relationships:**

I Tim. 2:15 talks about childbearing, therefore it obviously refers to marriage relationships.

The “woman” in I Tim. 2:14 obviously refers to Eve, but Eve is Adam’s wife, therefore it is not unreasonable to translate it as “wife”.

^[3] Some biblical scholars think that the teaching in I Corinthians 11:3-16 about women covering their heads applies only to married women. For example, ESV translates the word “woman” as “wife” in I Corinthians 11:3, 5, 6, 10, and 13.

III. Translation (I Timothy 2:11-15)

We will first present here a translation of 2:11-15, ^[4] and then examine the rationale of such a translation in the following section. The Young's Literal Translation ^[5] is shown below each verse for reference:

[2:11] Let a wife learn in quietness in all submissiveness,
(YLT) Let a woman in quietness learn in all subjection,

[2:12] but I do not allow a wife to teach or to exercise authority over a husband, but to be in quietness.

(YLT) and a woman I do not suffer to teach, nor to rule a husband, but to be in quietness,

[2:13] for Adam was first formed, then Eve,
(YLT) for Adam was first formed, then Eve,

[2:14] and Adam was not deceived [first], but the wife, having been deceived, came into transgression,

(YLT) and Adam was not deceived, but the woman, having been deceived, into transgression came,

[2:15] and she shall be saved through the child-bearing, if they remain in faith, and love, and sanctification, with self-control.

(YLT) and she shall be saved through the child-bearing, if they remain in faith, and love, and sanctification, with sobriety.

IV. Translation Notes and Discussions (I Timothy 2:11-15)

1. **[2:11] Let a wife learn in quietness in all submissiveness,**

Paul's teaching here is consistent with his teachings in Eph. 5:21-22 and Col. 3:18-19, as well as his in I Cor. 14:34-35.

2. **[2:12] but I do not allow a wife to teach or to exercise authority over a husband, but to be in quietness.**

“But” connects this verse to 2:11, see the NET translation notes. ^[6] Both of the words “teach (*didaskein*)” and “exercise authority (*authenteō*)” are present infinitives, which carry the continuous aspect in Greek. Here Paul is forbidding a wife to constantly teach or exercise authority over her husband.

As Dr. Lin had pointed out, the two verbs “teach (*didaskein*)” and “exercise authority (*authenteō*)” share one common subject and one common object. ^[2] For a woman to constantly teach and exercise authority over a man, the most probable situation is in the family. But if this restriction is applied to a mother teaching a son, then it would be inconsistent with the example in the bible (Prov. 31:1-2). Therefore the best interpretation is that here Paul is referring to the marriage relationship.

^[4] Leonard Li, “Translation Notes of the Chinese Union Version New Testament”,
<http://www.sbecc.org/UVNTNotes.pdf> (in Chinese)

^[5] YLT -- Young's Literal Translation (1898, <http://www.biblegateway.com>)

^[6] <http://net.bible.org/verse.php?book=1Ti&chapter=2&verse=12>

3. **[2:13-14] for Adam was first formed, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived [first], but the wife, having been deceived, came into transgression,**

The word “for” points to the fact that 2:13-14 is the rationale behind 2:11-12. Here Paul used the progression of the fall of human race to illustrate how the devil uses the wife to influence her husband to sin. Today in Christian churches, some brothers tend to listen to their wives more than to God. Therefore it is not uncommon for them to act against the word of God, or even to sin.

4. **[2:15] and she shall be saved through the child-bearing, if they remain in faith, and love, and sanctification, with self-control.**

Here the noun “child-bearing (*teknogonia*)” has the same root as the verb “to bear children (*teknogoneō*)” in I Tim. 5:14. Each word appears only once in the NT. From I Tim. 5:14, we can see that the “child-bearing” here is not just referring to childbirth, but also to rearing and teaching children. Thus, “child-bearing” is connected to “remain in faith, and love, and sanctification, with self-control”.

In addition, the meaning of the word “save (*sōzō*)” is not always referring to eternal salvation. The basic meaning of the word “save” is to leave a poor situation and to enter a good situation (for example: Mat. 8:24-25, 14:29-30; Luke 18:40-43).

Therefore, 2:15b is the result of 2:11-2:15a. If a mother has a good spiritual life (as manifested in submitting to her husband, remaining in faith, and love, and sanctification, with self-control), then in matters of rearing and teaching her children, she will certainly depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will receive God’s grace, and will avoid many problems in terms of parent-child relationships. This is what is meant by “being saved through the child-bearing”.

V. Conclusion

From the above discussions, we see that translating the ‘woman/man’ as ‘wife/husband’ is a very reasonable translation for I Timothy 2:11-14. Hopefully biblical scholars will consider this alternative translation and perhaps one day will revise the translations of this passage, so that it will no longer lead to unnecessary confusions for the Christian church.^[7]

^[7] This article can be found at <http://www.sbecc.org/WomenTeaching.pdf>. Its original Chinese version can be found at <http://www.sbecc.org/WomanTeaching.pdf>. It may be freely used, quoted, redistributed, or linked to, provided the author’s name and the location of this article are noted. Please send any comments or corrections to author’s e-mail address at lsli@alumni.upenn.edu. Last revision: 2012/6/21.