

# Don't Let the Popular 'Authority' Myth Hold You Captive When It Comes to Teaching in the Church

For many churches, “authority” is the central issue that determines a woman’s role in their congregation. One megachurch, for example, allows female pastors but only male elders. They explain that the governing body for their church is their board of elders, and since women cannot exercise governing authority, all elders must be men.

This “authority” myth is pervasive. The popular *Spirit-Filled Life Bible*, for example, without a shred of evidence, explains the prohibition toward women in 1 Timothy 2:12 as referring to “the authoritative office of apostolic teacher in the church.”

## Paul Did Not Exclude Women

The truth is that neither Paul nor any New Testament writer ever made “authority” the issue when it came to women serving in leadership roles in the church. The New Testament Greek word for “authority” is *exousia*, and it is found over 100 times in the Greek New Testament. Not once is a woman told she cannot exercise *exousia*.

I know someone will immediately point to 1 Timothy 2:12a, where Paul said, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man.” This, however, is a fallacious argument, since the word translated “authority” in this passage is not *exousia*. The word Paul uses here is *authentain*, and this is the only place it is found in the entire New Testament.

The fact that Paul chose to use this strange Greek word,

rather than *exousia*, is a clear indication that he is not addressing the normal exercise of authority in the church. Writing to Timothy in Ephesus, Paul is obviously addressing a situation unique to Timothy's commission in that city.

*Authentein* is a negative word that carried the meaning to "domineer" and "usurp authority." At least once in the ancient world, it was used of a murder. The murderer was said to have committed *authentein*. Since 1 Timothy 2:12 is the only time it is used in the New Testament, Paul cannot be addressing the normal exercise of authority in the church.

1 Timothy 2:12 is about Timothy confronting a false teaching that was making the rounds among the Christians in Ephesus. It was never meant to be used across the board and applied to all women everywhere (for a thorough discussion of this topic, see my book, [Paul, Women and Church](#)).

Again, nowhere is a woman told she cannot exercise *exousia*, which is the New Testament word for authority, and found over 100 times in the New Testament.

### **Jesus Blows Apart the "Authority" Myth**

Jesus completely blew apart the "authority" myth when he made "service" the criterion for leadership in His kingdom. Jesus, of course, never used the negative *authentein*, but He did use *exousia*; and He would not allow *exousia* to be the criterion for leadership in His kingdom.

This was made clear when James and John requested the two most prominent seats in His kingdom. When an argument then broke out among His disciples over who would be the greatest, Jesus rebuked them for their preoccupation with *exousia* (authority) and told them they were thinking like Gentiles, *i.e.*, like people who did not know God.

He then presented to them a new and radical model of leadership that would be characterized, not by *exousia*, but by

*diakonos*, or humble service (Mark 10:35-45). They must have been shocked when He told them they were to function as *diakonoi*, a Greek word that referred to a lowly “servant” with no connotations of status, importance or power.

If Jesus would not allow *exousia* to be a criterion for leadership, why do so many churches do so today?

### **The Early Church Followed Jesus’s Model**

During the first century, while Christian leadership was characterized by “service,” women freely functioned in all areas of leadership. This is obvious in numerous places, including Romans 16:1-15 where Paul commends and greets several women by name who were obviously prominent leaders in the church at that time.

These include Phoebe, who is described by Paul as a *diakonos*, the word Jesus said should characterize His leaders. He also calls her a *prostatis*, which the New King James Version translates as “helper,” but *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* says the word refers to “a woman set over others.” Paul also greets Priscilla, who along with her husband, hosted a church in their home, and Junia, whom Paul recognizes as an apostle.

In Philippians 4:3, Paul acknowledges the women whom he said, “Labored with me in the gospel.” Gerald F. Hawthorne, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, says that Paul, in this passage, uses a metaphor which means “to fight together side by side with,” clearly indicating that Paul sees these women not as peons under him, but as highly esteemed members of his team who have labored at his side in the cause of Christ.

Considering the many examples of women leaders in Scripture, it is no wonder that the noted British New Testament scholar, the late F.F. Bruce, declared,

The mainstream churches of Christendom, as they inch along towards a worthier recognition of the ministry of women, have

some way to go yet before they come abreast of Paul (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 21).

## **When Things Changed**

After Paul and the first generation of Christians passed off the scene, the church began to institutionalize, putting more and more emphases on outward forms and structure. As part of this institutionalizing process, they began to think of ministry, no longer in terms of service, but in terms of office and authority.

This “authority” approach to church and ministry reached its crescendo after Constantine and the emergence of a form of Christianity that is predicated on power and authority. It was after the church institutionalized and began to think of leadership in terms of “office” and “authority” that women began to be excluded from leadership roles in the church.

## **Where Are We Today?**

The fact that so much of the church still makes “authority” the criterion for excluding women from leadership, is an indication that we have not fully recovered from the Constantinian form of church where “authority” is the central issue. It is a clear sign that we have not fully returned to Jesus and the gospel, where ministry is not about authority, but about service.

Let us, therefore, pray for both spiritual awakening and reformation. Spiritual awakening that will ignite the hearts of Christians with a fresh passion and love for Jesus, and reformation that will change our authority-laden church structures into centers of service where women as well as men are free to exercise their leadership gifts and callings. This, I believe, will help position us to see another great world-wide spiritual awakening. {eoa}

*This article was derived from the book [Paul, Women and Church](#)*

by **Dr. Eddie L. Hyatt** and available from [Amazon](#) and his website, . Eddie is a board member of God's Word to Women,"a nonprofit ministry organization that is lifting the status of women around the world, and has a vision for making inroads with the gospel into the Islamic world through the women. With the help of friends and partners, Eddie and his wife, Dr. Susan Hyatt, have opened the International Christian Women's Hall of Fame on Main Street in Grapevine, Texas, adjacent to the DFW International Airport. The website for the Hall of Fame is [g](#) To subscribe to the GWTW newsletter, send an email to [drsuehyatt@](mailto:drsuehyatt@).