

Stop Weaponizing Scripture to Silence Women Who Are Called by God

At a conference in Colorado several years ago, a well-known female Bible teacher stood at the pulpit and gave a challenging sermon about prayer. I had read some of this woman's books so I was looking forward to hearing her message. Most of the people in the audience responded with amens and nods of approval as she spoke from years of ministry experience.

As soon as this woman began preaching, two men seated in front of me turned to each other and began praying quietly. "We bind the spirit of Jezebel in the name of Jesus," one of the men said. "Lord, we ask you to break the power of any deception," the other man prayed.

Why would these two guys feel obligated to bind demonic forces when a respected female Christian leader stood on stage? This woman was not a witch. She had an impeccable record of maturity and godly character. Her sermons were doctrinally sound. But these men viewed her as a threat because they held a narrow interpretation of Paul's words about women teachers in his first epistle to Timothy.

First Timothy 2:12 says this in the King James Version: "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."

Few passages in Scripture have been more twisted to impose sanctions on women who are called to preach or lead. The verse has been transformed into a bludgeoning weapon by believers who assume that Paul was handing down a universal edict banning all women for all time from exercising their spiritual gifts.

For many centuries Christian theologians have relied on the Holy Spirit to help them discern the intent of Paul's complicated words in this passage, and they concluded that the Bible clearly allows women to preach, prophesy, evangelize and serve in leadership roles. Yet a vocal minority of strict fundamentalists hold to a much narrower view, teaching that 1 Timothy 2:12 is a God-ordained gag order for all women. This is why Southern Baptists voted last week to reaffirm their opposition to ordaining women as pastors.

Here are four reasons why this passage should never be weaponized to shut women down:

1. God has empowered women throughout the Scriptures. If we use Paul's words to Timothy as a universal ban on women ministers, we would also need to take scissors and cut out countless passages from the rest of the Bible. Deborah, for example, led Israel for many years—and God fully sanctioned her leadership (see Judg. 4:4-5). Miriam served as an elder in ancient Israel (Mic. 6:4); Huldah was a prophet during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22:14-20); and Anna prophesied of the coming Messiah at the time Jesus was born (Luke 2:36-38). The prophet Joel declared that in the coming age of the Holy Spirit, “your sons and daughters will prophesy” (Joel 2:28). The Old Covenant prophets saw that in New Covenant times, women would play a much more vocal role.

2. Paul himself empowered women to speak and lead. It is laughable to suggest that the apostle Paul would have clamped down on all women, since he had so many gifted women serving on his team. He sent Phoebe, a deacon, to carry his letter to the Romans (Rom. 16:1-2). Priscilla was an anointed Bible teacher who, along with her husband, Aquila, helped Paul lay apostolic foundations in the early church.

Paul also mentions Chloe, a church leader in Corinth; Junia, an apostolic leader who suffered persecution; Euodia and Syntyche, two female leaders who had a disagreement (mentioned

in Phil. 4:2-4); and Nympha, who led a house church. The book of Acts also says the evangelist Philip had “four virgin daughters who were prophetesses” (Acts 21:9), and John’s second epistle is written to a female church leader. There was certainly no ban on women ministers in New Testament times.

3. Jesus freed women from cultural and religious restrictions.

While Jewish traditions certainly muzzled women, Jesus radically opposed those patriarchal attitudes. He was a defender of women, and He gave them a voice at a time when they had few rights. He sent an outcast Samaritan woman to preach to the men of her city; He allowed Mary of Bethany to kneel with the other disciples, breaking a rabbinical rule that women could not take such a position; He disciplined a group of women, listed in Luke 8:1-3, even when no other Jewish rabbi taught women; and He allowed one of those women, Mary Magdalene, to be the first vocal witness of His resurrection.

4. Paul’s words to Timothy were aimed at dealing with a dangerous heresy. The key to interpreting 1 Timothy 2:12 is found in the word “usurp.” This word is used in the King James Version, while modern translations use the erroneous phrase “have authority.” “Usurp” is the proper translation. The Greek word used here is *authentein*, a violent word that is only used once in the Bible. It denotes an aggressive and hostile takeover.

Most likely, Paul was warning Timothy about some false teachers (or perhaps one particular false teacher) who was attempting to overthrow God’s authority with heretical doctrines. Timothy led the church in Ephesus—the headquarters of pagan goddess worship in the ancient world. Many strange heresies circulated there about women, sex, transgenderism and even female domination of men. We don’t know exactly what the heretics were teaching, but Paul urged Timothy to shut them down in order to safeguard the gospel.

Paul had no issue with Spirit-filled, Bible-believing women such as Priscilla, Euodia or Phoebe. They preached the gospel with power, and they didn't mix it with pagan ideas. I'm sure he wanted more women like them to take the message of Jesus to new regions. But he would not allow a rebellious female heretic to stage a spiritual coup or to spread theological poison in the early church.

I certainly don't want any more male or female heretics. They need to be silenced. But I pray that we will recognize the spiritual gifts God has placed in the anointed women He has called. I pray we will empower and release them instead of misusing the Bible to shut them down.

J. Lee Grady was editor of Charisma for 11 years and now serves as senior contributing editor. He directs the Mordecai Project (), an international ministry that protects women and girls from gender-based violence. His latest books are "Follow Me" and "Let's Go Deeper"(Charisma House).