The Role of Women in the Church
by Dr. Steve Hereford

1 Timothy 2:11-12 says, “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.”

When Paul gave these instructions to Timothy, he gave three principles regarding women’s ministry in the church. First he says, they are learn in submission (v.11b; 1 Cor.11:3). He says, “Let a woman learn...with all submission.” In 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul says, “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” That verse teaches that women are to be in submission to men in the sense that they are not to usurp the role of leadership in the church, which belongs to qualified men. The word “submission” (hupotage) means, “the act of submission or obedience” (Friberg). D. Edmond Hiebert, says, “As a learner she is to be ‘in quietness,’ not talking or seeking to instruct others. She is to be in ‘complete subjection’ by voluntarily ranging herself under the divinely instituted headship of the man” (1 Timothy, p.60).

Second, he says they are not to teach men (v.12a). He says, “And I do not permit a woman to teach.” The word “Permit” (epitrepo) means to “let, allow” (UBS), “let someone do something” (Friberg). It means to “allow someone to do what he wants” (MacArthur). Paul is implying that some women at Ephesus had the desire to lead the church. There have always been women who seek leadership roles. God said the woman as a result of her sin in Genesis 3:16 says, “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.” The Hebrew word translated “desire” in this verse is used only one other time in the Pentateuch, where it speaks of the desire of sin to control Cain (Gen.4:7). We can conclude from that usage that Genesis 3:16 is saying women desire to take the control from men. The word “teach” is διδασκεῖν, with the use of the infinitive means, “to be a teacher.” Kenneth Wuest, says, “The kind of teacher Paul has in mind is spoken of in Acts 13:1, I Corinthians 12:28, 29, and Ephesians 4:11, God-called, and God-equipped teachers, recognized by the Church as those having authority in the Church in matters of doctrine and interpretation. This prohibition of a woman to be a teacher, does not include the teaching of classes of women, girls, or children in a Sunday School, for instance, but does prohibit the woman from being a pastor, or a doctrine teacher in a school. It would not be seemly, either, for a woman to teach a mixed class of adults” (Word Studies in the Greek NT).

The third and final principle that Paul gives regarding women in the church is pertaining to authority; They are not to usurp authority over men (v.12b). The words “Have authority” or “usurp authority” (authentein) occurs only here in the NT. Vincent says this is not a correct translation of the Greek word. It is rather, “to exercise dominion over.” George Knight in his book “New Testament Studies” concluded that the common meaning of authentein in extrabiblical literature is “to have authority over.” He discovered no negative connotation such as “abusive authority.” Some people have reinterpreted authentein in 1 Timothy 2:12 to mean “abusive authority.” They believe it is acceptable for women to teach and exercise authority over men as long as their authority does not become abusive. However, authentein does not mean “abusive authority.” There’s no justification for that addition to the text. If Paul were speaking of
abusive authority, he would not have limited his warning to women. Teaching and usurping authority contrast with silence and submission. Women in the church are not to be in any position where men are subordinate to them. John Gill says, “The apostle goes on to give some other instructions to women, how they should behave themselves in public worship, in the church of God; he would have them be learners and not teachers, sit and hear, and learn more of Christ, and of the truth of the Gospel, and to maintain good works; and he would have them learn in silence, and not offer to rise and speak, under a pretense of having a word from the Lord, or of being under an impulse of the Spirit of the Lord, as some frantic women have done; and if they should meet with anything, under the ministry of the word, they did not understand, or they had an objection to, they were not to speak in public, but ask their own husbands at home; see 1Co_14:34. And thus, they were to behave” (John Gill’s Exposition on the Entire Bible).

Submission, teaching, and authority—three areas that will continue to divide women and men in the church. May we submit to what His Word means so that it is not blasphemed but honored.