

## **On women pastors and biblical authority: A Presbyterian reflection**

Responding to the Southern Baptist Convention's actions to explicitly bar female pastoral leadership, biblical scholar Frances Taylor Gench reflects on how the PC(USA) engages Scripture that instructs women to be subservient such as 1 Timothy 2.

BY **FRANCES TAYLOR GENCH**

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THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

On June 14, 2023, during its annual meeting in New Orleans, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) took steps to more explicitly bar women from serving as pastors, voting to amend its constitution to specify that a church can only be Southern Baptist if it “affirms, appoints, or employs only men as any kind of pastor or elder” (an amendment requiring another vote at the SBC’s next annual meeting for adoption). Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and a leading intellectual in the denomination spoke in favor of this amendment on the floor of the convention, declaring the issue one of “fundamental biblical authority.”

Members of the PC(USA) likely found this news flash perplexing. We, too, take biblical authority seriously, but after extended discernment of what obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture requires of us with respect to women in ministry, we reached a different conclusion. Thus, after decades of debating overtures related to this matter at General Assemblies past, our predecessor denominations (the UPCUSA and the PCUS) began ordaining women as Ministers of Word and Sacrament in 1956 and 1965 respectively. In 1983, when the UPCUSA and the PCUS reunited to form the PC(USA), A Brief Statement of Faith was drafted and eventually adopted in 1991 as part of our *Book of Confessions*. It provided a specific confessional warrant for women’s ordination, affirming trust in God the Holy Spirit who “calls women and men to all ministries of the church.”

### **Scripture as a reforming force**

But what about biblical warrants? When the PC(USA) (along with other mainline denominations) finally decided to lift prohibitions on the ordination of women, did they do so in violation of Scripture? Were they throwing Scripture out?

Some Presbyterians contended that this was in fact the case. In response, they withdrew from the PC(USA) and formed a new denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). But Presbyterians who stayed within the fold (then and now) can answer these questions with a resounding “No!” It was precisely *because* of Scripture’s witness that a new collective judgment emerged: the Holy Spirit calls both women and men to all ministries of the church — we had erred in restricting women’s leadership.

It was Scripture itself that reformed the PC(USA), projecting a vision of male and female as created equally in God’s image, and claiming that in Christ “there is no longer male and female” (Galatians 3:28). Thus, in obedience to what they discerned as the deeper, broader, more fundamental witness of Scripture, many Presbyterians changed their opinion on the question of women’s ordination.

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Scripture, by the power of God’s Spirit, continues to form and reform us, shaping our vision of the world and guiding us to new understandings of what God is calling us to be and do. This is why Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians take as their motto the ancient words “church reformed, always reforming” (*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*) or, as the *Book of*

*Order* fully translates it: “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit (*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*). (For more, [read here](#).) This important point – that Scripture itself continues to form and reform the church – is often overlooked in the midst of contentious ecclesial debates where one “side” claims faithfulness to Scripture and declares that the “other side” has abandoned it. Often, there is biblical logic and integrity to an opponent’s point of view.

### **How do Presbyterians engage with Scripture?**

I do not presume to speak for all Presbyterians. There are many opinions with respect to biblical authority and interpretation under our denominational roof. (Neither are Southern Baptists of one mind with respect to recent developments in their convention; many with whom I am acquainted are apoplectic at the moment). But as food for thought, let me venture a few further observations that may clarify aspects of Presbyterian engagement with biblical texts featured prominently in ongoing debates about women’s ordination and pastoral leadership.

### **Interpreting Scripture is hard work**

For starters, Presbyterians contend that interpreting Scripture is hard work for Scripture is not self-interpreting; it requires interpretation, which is never simply a reiteration of the text, but laboring to bring it into our own time and place. Moreover, as Terence Fretheim observes, ascribing a high level of authority to the Bible (e.g., “I believe in the authority of Scripture more than you do”) does not guarantee the accuracy of our interpretations (“The Authority of the Bible and the Imaging of God” in *Engaging Biblical Authority*). William Placher in “Struggling with Scripture” adds, “People who take [the Bible’s] authority equally seriously can disagree about its meaning” (*Struggling with Scripture*).

### **Scripture is human and divine**

Presbyterians also affirm that Scripture is both a human word and a divine word. The Confession of 1967, included in the *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) articulates this point as follows: “The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written” and that they “reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current.” The Confession of 1967 goes on to note that “The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.”

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### **What does 1 Timothy 2:8-15 have to say about women’s leadership?**

Such considerations are important as we engage a text such as 1 Timothy 2:8-15, the pivotal biblical text in ongoing ecclesial controversies (in the SBC at present and well beyond) over the role of women in church and society. Four of the eight verses in this text are singled out for attention (the others disregarded) whenever the question of women’s leadership is on the table: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:11-14).

### **1 Timothy 2 teaches us about the history of our faith**

A CLOSER LOOK AT



# 1 Timothy 2



In my book *Encountering God in Tyrannical Texts: Reflections on Paul, Women, and the Authority of Scripture*, I spend time on historical and contextual considerations related to 1 Timothy 2, including:

ONE

## False teachers

The author's angry polemic against false teachers (4:1-5; also 2:3-7; 6:3-5, 20-21 and 2 Timothy 2:16-18, 23-26; 3:1-9, 13; 4:3-4) whose promotion of rigorous asceticism and celibate piety, apparently found a hearing, especially among women (2 Timothy 3:5b-7).

TWO

## Socioeconomics

The socioeconomic dimensions of the text (1 Timothy 2:9-10) and the possible power struggle between wealthy women and church leaders named by the laying on of hands — for in a patronage culture, major benefactors may have assumed that their donations entitled them to leadership roles (1 Timothy 6:16-19)

THREE

## Anxiety

Anxiety about the church's public image and reputation and its impact on mission in a world suspicious of new religious movements.

For more on this text, see also Carla Swofford Works' *The Least of These: Paul and the Marginalized*.

This fascinating, contentious text raises a

number of historical, contextual questions, too numerous to be rehearsed here. The text also inadvertently preserves invaluable pieces of our faith history, for as a prescriptive (rather than descriptive) text, it aims to change existing behavior — and prescriptive material is often the best historical evidence we have that the opposite was happening. As Deborah Krause observes in *1 Timothy, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary*, “You don’t tell women to shut up, unless they are talking.” You don’t command them not to teach unless they are, in fact, teaching.

Thus, 1 Timothy 2 documents the struggles of foremothers in the faith, straining against prescribed reality, from whom we can take courage. As Krause puts it, this Scripture preserves the site of a debate in an early church about who has a voice in the church and authority to speak, inviting our own engagement with this enduring question. Indeed, engagement with this text (and others invoked in debates over women’s ecclesial leadership such as 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36) can be a means by which the Spirit, “in a broken and fearful world, ... gives us courage ... to hear the voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace” (A Brief Statement of Faith).

### **Wrestling with the text**

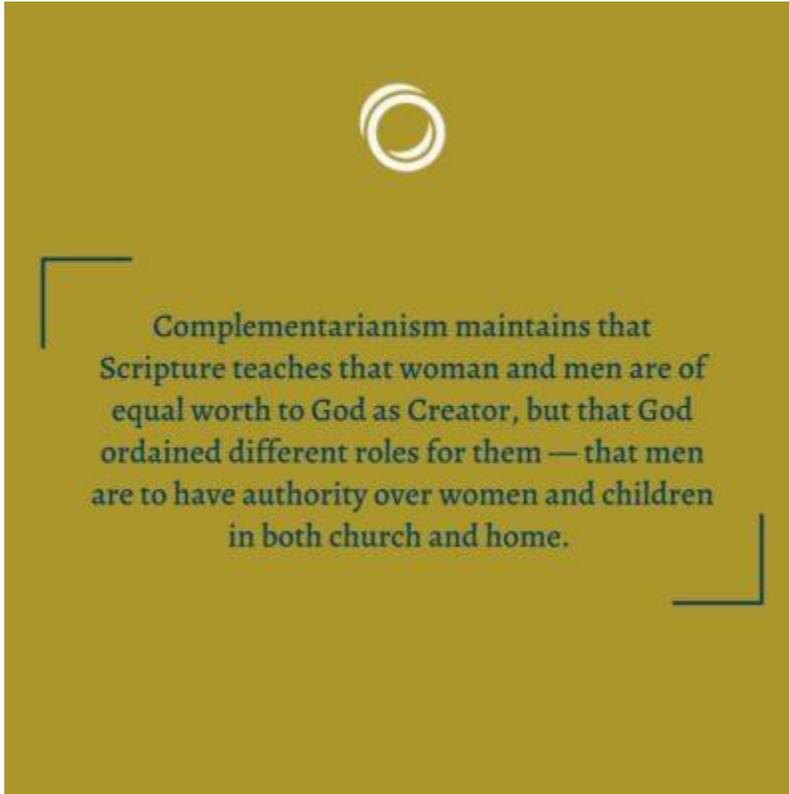
Given that Presbyterians value the life of the mind in service to God, we tend to ask questions when we encounter a text like 1 Timothy 2, as well we should, for as Ellen F. Davis contends, “Receiving the Scriptures as God’s good gift means opening our minds to be changed by them; it does *not* mean relinquishing the right to disagree with some of what we encounter there — even the necessity of disagreeing on some significant points of faith and practice — since the biblical writers disagree among themselves, even within each Testament” (“The Soil That Is Scripture” in *Engaging Biblical Authority*). I hope Presbyterians are also inclined to argue with the text — to engage it, address it, confident that wrestling with Scripture is an act of faithfulness, of taking the text with the utmost seriousness. Indeed, we have much to learn from our Jewish neighbors about the sacred practice of arguing with Scripture.

There is much to argue with in 1 Timothy 2, for the author’s tendentious midrash of Adam and Eve’s story in Genesis 2-3 makes several very questionable points. To mention just two of them, the author contends that women are not to teach or have authority over men because they are, by nature, more gullible, easily prone to deception: “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:14). And the moral of this story, in the author’s mind, is clear. Given this inherent character flaw, daughters of Eve ought not to occupy positions of influence and authority, else all hell breaks loose and men who listen, like Adam, fall into transgression.

To be clear: this contention is downright problematic, even theologically outrageous. Genesis, for example, does not absolve Adam (see Genesis 3:8-24), nor does Romans, which says, “sin came into the world through one man” (Romans 5:12, 16, 19), ascribing guilt essentially to Adam — as does 1 Corinthians when it affirms that, “as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

If one were to read further, the following verse in 1 Timothy 2:15 offers a word of assurance and mollification: “Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (1 Timothy 2:15). This verse is unique in the New Testament in suggesting that salvation for women is different from that of men, requiring adherence to domestic, maternal roles. It is a highly selective reading of Genesis. The rhetoric is exaggerated, and the logic is strained. But in the minds of many Christians around this world (including the majority opinion in the SBC at present), this argument is especially authoritative

because it derives from the creation ordinances, reflecting the divine will revealed in the very orders of creation.



Indeed, 1 Timothy 2's connection to creation ordinances is an important aspect of the text's normative authority for those within the SBC, PCA and elsewhere who hold to a view called "complementarianism." But as Daniel Kirk perceptively notes in *Jesus Have I Loved, But Paul?: A Narrative Approach to the Problem of Pauline Christianity*, viewing the genders through this lens seems to give "the last word to the curse of the fall rather than to the redemption of Christ." Kirk continues: Does not the subordination of women in the church "as a norm for all times and places undermine the scope and power of God's redemptive work and of our own calling to make the church the living story of new creation"? These are important questions with which to grapple!

### **Reading 1 Timothy 2 alongside other Scripture**

Moreover, it is important to remember that the Bible argues with itself, providing a model for our own engagement with it. 1 Timothy is not the only voice in Scripture, and as Walter Brueggemann observes, "to give any one voice in Scripture the authority to silence other voices surely distorts the text and misconstrues the liveliness that the text itself engenders in the interpretive community" ("Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection" in *Struggling with Scripture*). Thus, voices with contrary opinions beg to be heard, which is why a classic principle of biblical interpretation (one for which Reformed Christians such as Presbyterians are best known) is that we interpret Scripture by Scripture: the entire biblical canon is the context for understanding the fullness of Christian faith and life.

So we wrestle with texts like 1 Timothy 2:8-15 (or 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36) in the context of the whole of Scripture, bringing other biblical voices into the conversation — for 1 Timothy 2 is not the only text in the Bible that speaks of women in the church, of relationships between male and female, of the means of salvation. It is not the only text in the New Testament that makes claims about life together in the Christian community. 1 Timothy 2 has a right to be heard, but

its insistence that women should not teach or have authority over men, that they should keep silent and earn salvation by bearing children, needs to be placed in conversation with the presentation in Acts of Priscilla's authoritative instruction of Apollos (Acts 18:26), or with Paul's odd discussion in 1 Corinthians of appropriate headgear for women when they are in fact praying and prophesying publicly in worship (1 Corinthians 11:2-16), as well as his insistence on justification by grace through faith alone (Romans 3:21-31; 5:1; 10:10).

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And what about Romans 16? This text has not figured prominently in ongoing ecclesial controversies over appropriate roles for women in church and society, though it should have, for in it, Paul generously praises ten women as colleagues in ministry (including a "deacon" named Phoebe and an "apostle" named Junia), honoring their significant labor on behalf of the gospel and the church. Indeed, Romans 16 bears indisputable witness to the fact that women, as well as men, exercised leadership in the earliest Christian communities, actively contributing to the formation and expansion of the church.

When 1 Timothy 2 is up for discussion, Galatians 3:28 also needs to be in the ring, for how do you square 1 Timothy's insistence on women's subordination with the affirmation that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"? The Bible itself resists any monological notion of authority given its multitude of voices. And because its witness is multivocal and multivalent, it requires on our part faithful struggle to hear and discern.

### **God is at work in our questions**

To be clear, wrestling with questions the text raises does not mean that we are "throwing Scripture out." We can disagree with texts like 1 Timothy 2:8-15 or 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36, and our wrestling with (and against) their claims can be part of God's own work in us, forming in us the mind of Christ, as we learn from both dangers and insights that biblical texts present. For can we not learn from the dangers as well as the insights — from the evidence of painfully imperfect efforts to embody the gospel? I'd venture to say that we see a good bit of imperfection reflected in 1 Timothy 2, which I pray is not a cavalier judgment but one that emerges from serious wrestling with the text, in conversation with the whole of Scripture and the collective wisdom of the church, which now benefits from 2,000 years of discipleship experience — and, as Ellen Davis advises, a judgment made with the reluctance called for whenever we find it necessary to critique and correct a family elder ("The Soil That is Scripture").

More could be said about learning from both the insights and the dangers a biblical text may present. But in closing, I invite you to consider the former Archbishop of Canterbury's eloquent summary of this important point. Scripture, Rowan Williams contends, is the record of "an encounter, a contest, a wrestling":

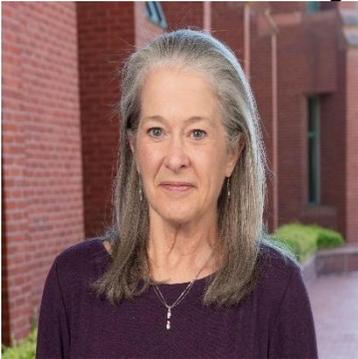
Here in Scripture is God's urgency to communicate; here in Scripture is our mishearing, our misappropriating, our deafness, and our resistance. Woven together in Scripture are those two things, the giving of God and our inability to receive what God wants to give ... The gift of God, the liberty of God, is passed through the distorting glass of our own fears.

So, Williams goes on to suggest,

When we listen to a passage that is difficult, alien, or offensive, I think our reaction should be neither to say, "This is the Word of the Lord, so the difficulty is my problem," nor to say, "This is rubbish, we ought to produce a more politically correct version of Scripture!" Our task, rather, is to say that the revelation of God comes to us in the middle of weakness and fallibility. We read

neither with a kind of blind and thoughtless obedience to every word of Scripture, as if it simply represented the mind of God, nor with that rather priggish sensibility that desires to look down on the authors of Scripture as benighted savages. We read with a sense of our own benighted savagery in receiving God's gift, and our solidarity with those writers of scripture caught up in the blazing fire of God's gift who yet struggle with it, misapprehend it, and misread it (*A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections*).

(It is worth noting that Williams made these striking observations in a sermon on 1 Timothy 2!) Scripture itself, by the power of God's Spirit, continues to form and reform us, shaping our vision of the world and guiding us to new understandings of what God is calling us to be and do. So may Presbyterians keep wrestling with Scripture, confident that God is present in all our engagement with it, which is, after all, why we call it "Holy" — and confident that by the power of God's Spirit, it will continue to form and reform us, shaping our vision of the world and guiding us to new understandings of what God is calling us to be and do.



**FRANCES TAYLOR GENCH**

Frances Taylor Gench is Herbert Worth and Annie H. Jackson Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and the author of *Encountering God in Tyrannical Texts: Reflections on Paul, Women, and the Authority of Scripture* (Westminster John Knox, 2015).