

Faith Pulpit

Mothers Saved in Childbearing?

The topic of a woman's role in the church has been one of the most heated debates in contemporary Christianity. Moreover, a woman's role in the home, as a wife and mother, is under attack in our culture. In this article, Mrs. Martha Hartog, adjunct faculty member at Faith Baptist Bible College in Ankeny, Iowa, addresses this issue with a thoughtful examination of the phrase, "she will be saved in childbearing" (1 Tim. 2:15).

In 1 Timothy 2:8–15 Paul focused on a woman's role in the church as well as her role as a mother. The passage closes with these words: "Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control" (2:15).¹ A brief look at its context and some grammatical matters should help us understand the meaning and importance of this verse.

Context

Broad context and historical setting One of Paul's purposes for writing this epistle relates to believers' conduct "in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (3:15). Unfortunately, some had already departed from the apostolic truth (1:3; 6:20, 21). They promoted asceticism, which included abstinence from marriage, and thus by extension, from childbearing (4:3). Because they had persuaded some Christian women to abandon traditional female roles (5:14, 15), Paul charged them, "I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house" (5:14a).

Immediate context First Timothy 2:15 concludes Paul's instructions regarding public worship in the church (2:8–15). First, Paul addressed the issue of conduct in prayer (2:8–11). Men were to pray with a cleansed conscience and a proper attitude (2:8). Women were to reflect godliness by dressing modestly and adorning themselves with godly deeds (2:9, 10).

Next Paul directed his attention to a woman's role in learning and teaching (2:11-15).² A woman was to learn quietly with all submission, and she was not to exercise authority over a man-she was not to teach him (2:11, 12). Paul based his injunctions on two historical events: the order of Creation and the manner of the Fall (2:13, 14). "In typical rabbinic fashion, Paul was making an analogical application based on the Genesis text."³ Paul then concluded his instructions with a promise and a condition (2:15).

Grammatical Matters

Antecedent of "she will be saved" Four possibilities exist: (1) Some perceive an allusion to Genesis 3:15 and think the antecedent is Eve, who "holds within her the means for the salvation of the world and of herself."⁴ (2) She is a combination of Eve and Mary. "The woman (Eve) will be saved by the childbearing (of Christ by Mary)."⁵ (3) She represents the women in Ephesus. "Obviously Paul is not talking about Eve's salvation but 'the woman' in Ephesus."⁶ (4) She represents all Christian women who demonstrate faith, love, holiness, and self-control.⁷

The sense of "saved" Writers have proposed several ideas: (1) physical safekeeping in childbirth; (2) protection from false teaching; or (3) spiritual salvation, meaning either deliverance from sin's penalty (justification) or deliverance from sin's influence (sanctification). Mounce contends that both the context and Paul's use of the verb "confirm that v 15 is speaking about salvation from sin."⁸ Bowman depicts salvation as a "trajectory that has justification as its beginning point and sanctification as the route of the trajectory. Both justification and sanctification will be consummated at a future time."⁹

The force of the Greek article ??? before "childbearing" Some stress the particularizing function of the article and say that the childbearing refers to Jesus' birth.¹⁰ Others believe that the article is generic, referring to childbearing in general.¹¹

Antecedent of "they continue" Commentators propose these possibilities: (1) The husband and wife.¹² (2) The woman's children.¹³ (3) The Christian women mentioned earlier (2:9, 10) who are not to leave the sphere of godliness in which they find themselves but must continue to display godly virtues.¹⁴

The shift from "she" to "they" The analogy between Eve and the Ephesian women causes a shift from the singular to the plural. The reason for this shift becomes clear if the woman in verse 15 refers back to the woman in verses 11 and 12. Childbearing then "stands in opposition to the sphere of public teaching which was closed to her."¹⁵ Verses 13 and 14 reflect "a common rabbinic method of referring to the Old Testament, a method known as summary citation."¹⁶ Having cited Genesis 2 and 3 to buttress his injunction concerning a woman's teaching, Paul returned to women in worship (vv. 9, 10) and ended "on the same note with which he began."¹⁷ Structuring 1 Timothy 2:9-15 as a chiasm (see below) clarifies the shift and helps us identify the women involved.

The Meaning of "She Will Be Saved in Childbearing"

In view of these considerations, what does the phrase “she will be saved in childbearing” mean? Several views have been offered:

- (1) Women will be kept safe physically during childbirth.¹⁸ However, many godly women have died in childbirth. Moreover, the term “salvation” regularly has a spiritual meaning in Paul’s writings.
- (2) Women in Paul’s day would be kept from teaching false doctrine through their maternal roles.¹⁹ Nevertheless, “Paul roots his teaching deeply in the culture-transcending events of the Creation and Fall of man and woman. There is absolutely nothing in the passage which would suggest that Paul issued his instructions because of a local situation of societal pressure.”²⁰
- (3) Women will be saved through good works, represented by childbearing.²¹ Scriptures, however, teach that salvation is by God’s grace through faith in Christ-not by works (Eph. 2:8, 9).
- (4) Women will be saved through the particular childbearing of Jesus.²² Those who hold this view link “childbearing” with Genesis 3:15 and emphasize the particularizing function of the article.²³ The antecedent of “she will be saved” is Eve (who may represent “woman” generically), who then becomes Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, Parry pointedly observes, “It is difficult to believe that S. Paul would have alluded to the Incarnation in this obscure and cursory manner.”²⁴ Moreover, Mary was not saved by giving birth to Jesus.²⁵
- (5) Christian mothers will be “saved,” or “delivered,” from the sin of exercising authority over men in the church because they give their time and effort in bearing children. This view interprets “she will be saved” as a woman’s deliverance from the effects of sin and childbearing as both bearing and rearing children.²⁶ As Calvin explained, “the Apostle does not speak merely about having children, but about enduring all the distresses, which are manifold and severe, both in the birth and the rearing of children.”²⁷

Conclusion

The grammatical and historical considerations lead me to prefer the last view. A Christian woman is “saved,” or “delivered,” from the sin of exercising authority over man in the church (specifically, teaching him) if she is faithful in her God-ordained role of bearing and rearing children. Moreover, her place in God’s overall plan of redemption (already implied in Gen. 3), is “preserved” through such a role. Paul selected childbearing because of its mention in Genesis 3, and “because of the emphasis of the false teachers who denigrated marriage and the maternal role of women.”²⁸

Deliverance through motherhood has a condition: godly character. Although the passage deals with a woman’s church life, faithfulness to motherhood will affect her whole life.

The connection Paul made to the curse on Eve (Gen. 3:16) supports this conclusion.²⁹ For the woman, her increased pain in childbearing becomes a blessing—her “salvation.” Childbearing will preserve her special role in God’s redemptive plan by keeping her from exercising authority over a man, which is her “forbidden fruit” in the context of church worship.

The coming of Christ allowed the woman to overcome her desire to rule over her husband (see Gen. 3:16b and 4:7). But also, childbearing (which multiplied in pain and sorrow due to the Fall) has taken a redemptive turn by playing a part in overcoming sin’s corruption of Creation. Not only is Eve’s prophesied Seed the Redeemer, but women in general are given a redemptive opportunity and purpose in their own (painful) childbearing.³⁰

Application

Paul is not saying that all women must have children in order to be saved or to live a godly life. “He selects childbearing because it is the most notable example of the divinely intended difference in role between men and women, and most women throughout history have had children.”³¹ Although the term “childbearing” here refers strictly to bearing and nurturing children, we may apply it in its broad sense of nurturing children.

Christian married women who are not able to bear children may fulfill their motherhood role by adopting or by fostering children (cf. Eph. 1:5; Ps. 68:5). And all Christian women, married or unmarried, may nurture children spiritually as Paul did Timothy—Paul’s “true son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2).

God’s Word differs greatly from our culture’s voices that belittle motherhood. God calls Christian mothers to rear godly children. First Timothy 2:15 should motivate all Christian women to bestow their God-given maternal instincts on needy children. With God’s help, we may rear children for His glory and look forward to our Savior’s commendation, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Works Cited

1. Mounce calls this verse “one of the strangest verses in the New Testament” (William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000], 143).
2. The anarthrous ‘woman,’ functions as a generic noun . . . appropriate in the statement of a general truth” (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 117, 118).
3. Ann Bowman, “Women in Ministry: An Exegetical Study of 1 Timothy 2:11–15” [*Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992): 193–213]: 204. Cf. 1 Cor. 11:8–12.
4. Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 183.
5. Thomas Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 101.
6. Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 37.
7. Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 48.
8. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 145.

9. Bowman, "Women in Ministry": 208. "Reference to final eschatological redemption . . . cannot be ruled out . . . at 1 Tim. 2:15" ("?????" in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament).
10. Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1995), 115.
11. Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 89.
12. Walter Lock, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1966), 33.
13. Gregory of Nysa, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IX* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 167.
14. "?????" in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957).
15. D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Timothy* (Chicago: Moody, 1957), 62.
16. Bowman, "Women in Ministry": 203, 204. Cf. Jesus' approach in Matthew 19:3-5.
17. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 147. Paul used this rabbinic method in Ephesians 5:22-33. He admonished wives and husbands, based on his admonitions on Genesis 2, and then addressed the husbands and wives again.
18. H. A. Ironside, *Timothy Titus and Philemon* (Neptune: Loizeaux, 1947), 72.
19. David Scholer, "1 Timothy 2:9-15 & the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry" in *Women, Authority & the Bible*, Alvera Mickelsen, ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 200.
20. Douglas Moo, "1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance" in *Trinity Journal* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 62-83: 82.
21. C. Spicq, *Saint Paul Les Epitres Pastorales*, Tome I, *Etudes Bibliques* (Paris: Gabalda, 1969), 383.
22. Kent, *Pastoral Epistles*, 114-116.
23. *Ibid.*, 115.
24. John Parry, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London: Cambridge University, 1920), 15.
25. Introducing her as a new player into the drama "unnecessarily complicates an already confusing passage" (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 145).
26. "Childbearing" is not merely a synecdoche of a woman's godly works (cf., Moo, "1 Timothy 2:11-15": 72).
27. John Calvin, *The Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, William Pringle trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 71.
28. Thomas R. Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15: A Dialogue with Scholarship" in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, Andreas Kostenberger and Thomas Schreiner, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 119.
29. On contrasting v. 15 with vv. 11 and 12 or connecting it with vv. 13 and 14: "These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive" (Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 147).
30. Paul Hartog, personal interview.
31. Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15," 118.

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