

Rightly Dividing 1 Timothy 2:9

INTRODUCTION

1 Timothy 2:9 is a very significant passage of Scripture to many people. It is the one Scripture that speaks so clearly to the importance of modest dress for a woman.

I have studied this passage significantly in the past two years, and it has always left me uncertain as to Paul's intended meaning. At very least, I had reason to question whether the meaning that we have traditionally assigned to it was accurate.

As a result of my study, I have come to believe that the verse is fairly significantly mistranslated. Consequently, Paul's intended meaning is very often missed while another meaning which was not in his mind at all is elevated to that status of scriptural command.

I am fully aware that some will find my suggestions very disturbing or perhaps even outrageous. I expect that this article may be read by people who would vehemently disagree with my conclusions. I welcome critical analysis of my work. What I truly hope is that no one will reject this work out of hand without determining where or how I might be mistaken.

The truth is never afraid of a challenge. If my work is in error, then the real truth will survive this challenge and this work will demonstrate its own weakness in the end. On the other hand, if what I say is true, then this is the truth that will survive any honest challenge.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

There are some presuppositions about the Bible which I will assume for the context of this article. They are so foundational that if someone does not agree with these points, then there would be little benefit in reading the rest of the article. However, leaving them unsaid would be a significant oversight.

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, without error in its original manuscripts. It is authoritative everywhere it speaks. The Bible is our only infallible guide for life and truth.
2. Because the Bible was not written in English, the most accurate interpretations are to be found by referencing the original languages as much as possible and practical. In other words, wherever a translation is found to be in disagreement with the original language texts, the Greek and Hebrew are to be considered authoritative over the English.
3. Because the Bible was written in another time to another culture, the most accurate understanding of the text must take cultural context into account.

I will make every attempt to treat God's Word with the greatest respect and careful, honest, humble, and submissive evaluation. I greatly appreciate the fine work of the many who contributed to the translation of the Scriptures so that I could have them in English.

However, I also only acknowledge the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture applies only to the text in the original language, not its translation. Therefore, I do not count it a dishonor to the text or the translators to evaluate the accuracy of the translators' work, even if on occasion, credible evidence is found that an alternate translation of a word or phrase might be more accurate.

In truth, preachers stand in their pulpits and do this very thing every week. And whenever a new translation of the Scriptures is published, it reflects the work of other scholars who found reason to believe that different translations of the same original texts were worth crafting and publishing.

The primary English translations from which I conducted my research are the King James Version (KJV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB). Both of these translations are very accurate, making a diligent effort to translate word for word as much as possible. It is therefore much easier to reference Strong's Concordance and other resources relating to the original language texts since they are keyed to specific original language words.

As valuable as "thought for thought" translations are (like the New International Version), they naturally reflect the interpretation of the passages as understood by the translators. Therefore, the translation will only be as accurate as the translators' understanding. Such translations do, however, provide a good comparative resource along the way.

THE TEXT

The Scripture text in question is 1 Timothy 2:9. I've quoted that verse below (in bold print) along with its immediate context. The specific words that I will focus on are underlined.

*8 I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. 9 In like manner also, that women **adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;** 10 But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. 11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. 12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. - [KJV]*

*8 Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. 9 Likewise, I want women to **adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments,** 10 but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. 11 A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. 12 But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. [NASB]*

FACTS

...A series of observations which are empirically true about this passage of Scripture. Some of these facts may be surprising, or may be deemed by some as insignificant or irrelevant. Nevertheless, none will be able to contradict them.

1. The words, "in like manner" (KJV) and "likewise" (NASB) indicate a similarity between Paul's instructions to men and women.

2. While Paul does list some things which women are to avoid wearing, there are no specifics about what they *are* to wear.
3. The Greek word translated “adorn” is not a word used anywhere else in the NT in reference to the act of dressing.
4. The Greek word translated “adorn” (G2885 - *kosmeo*, verb) is actually directly related to the word *kosmos* (G2889, noun) which means “order” and is typically translated “world” in the NT.
5. Likewise, the word translated “modest” (KJV) or “proper” (NASB) is the Greek word *kosmios* (G2887, adj.) and it too is related to word *kosmos*.
6. Furthermore, the same word *kosmios* appears in the very next chapter — 1 Timothy 3:2 — in reference to the qualifications for an elder. Here it is translated “of good behavior” (KJV) and “respectable” (NASB).
7. The word translated “apparel” (KJV) or “clothing” (NASB) is the Greek word *katastole* (G2689, noun) and this is the only time it ever appears in the NT.
8. *katastole* is a noun and, according to Strong’s Concordance and other sources, is related to the word *katastellō* (G2687, verb) which appears twice in the NT
9. The verb, *katastellō* is found twice in Acts 19:35-36 and is translated “had appeared” [the people], and “quiet” [people being quiet] (KJV), and “quieting” (the crowd) and [keep] “calm” (NASB).
10. The Greek word *katastole* is not a common biblical word for any type of clothing. By contrast, the word later translated “array” (KJV) or “garments” (NASB) is very commonly used word for clothing in the NT
11. I have not been able to find any secular historical reference to the *katastole* as a garment of any sort in ancient Greek or Roman culture. This has not been true of any other Greek word for any other garment referenced in the NT. (References to *katastole* abound on the internet, but all of them — so far as I have discerned — have been from Christian websites intending to describe what kind of garment it was with the intent of describing what kind of garment that modest women should wear).
12. 1 Peter 3:3-5 contains parallel instructions for women. The words *kosmos* (G2889, noun) and *kosmeo* (G2885, verb) both appear there (translated “adornment” and “adorn[ed]” by KJV and NASB). Both passages also reference jewelry, braided hair, and clothing as *not* the correct expression of “adornment” and attitudes and actions as the preferred means of adornment.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FACTS

...Questions which the facts should raise in our minds about the passage and its correct interpretation. *Our awareness of the facts above should cause us to question the accuracy of the translations of the words in question (underlined in the Scripture quotations above). And if our interpretation has been formed based upon a weak or faulty translation, then it follows that our understanding could likewise be flawed. The following items are questions which were raised by my observations. I will reference the numbered facts above as needed.*

1. Re: *Fact #1* — What precisely is the logical connection between Paul’s instructions to men (v8) and to women (v9ff) as translated in the KJV and NASB? The men are to pray, lift holy hands, avoid anger, and avoid “dissenting”

(Greek: *dialogismos*, G1261). The women are told to dress modestly and simply and to do good works. They are connected by the term “likewise” yet I see no clear likeness. Could it be that our current translation of *kosmeo*, *kosmios*, and *katastole* are obscuring the connection?

2. Re: *Fact #2* — If *katastole* is a kind of garment that women are commanded to wear, then why did Paul instruct the women to *not* wear jewelry, braided hair and costly garments, but to *instead* do good works? In other words, how is “doing good works” a fulfillment of Paul’s command that women adorn themselves with *katastole*? Could it be that *katastole* actually has meaning that encompasses not just a woman’s attire, but rather her entire presentation of herself (including clothing *and* actions)?
3. Re: *Fact #3* — Does *kosmeo* really indicate the act of getting dressed? If not, then if that’s what Paul meant, why did he not use one of the terms which does mean that? Have we missed part of Paul’s meaning by the use of the word “adorn” when in English, that term carries the meaning of only the visual decor and arrangement? Yet evidently, Paul had something else in mind... even downplaying the external decor.
4. Re: *Fact #4* — Does the word “adorn” really capture the essence of the Greek term *kosmeo* since it is actually a word which emphasizes “order” rather than appearance?
5. Re: *Fact #5* — In English the terms “adorn” and “modest” (KJV) or “adorn” and “proper” seem to have no intrinsic similarity in meaning, yet in the Greek, they are actually spelled with the same first four letters. That connection would be unmistakable to the original audience. Might our current translation be worthy of a review of its accuracy since that connection is so obscured as to be indiscernible?
6. Re: *Fact #6* — The term translated “modest” (KJV) is translated 4 different ways by the KJV and NASB translators. Can we be sure that “modest” is the best translation when it is evident that even the translators themselves did not translate it that way consistently?
7. Re: *Fact #7* — Can we be sure that this word *katastole* refers to a type of clothing when the word is found nowhere else in the NT? Does the 1 Tim 2 context really support the idea that it must be an article of clothing? And how can we know what *kind* of clothing it was (and how it was worn), since it is neither described nor explained here or elsewhere in the Bible?
8. Re: *Fact #8* — Since *katastole* is a noun, can we look to the etymology of the word to help us discover its full meaning? Furthermore, if we find in Scripture the verb form of that same word, should we not look to how that word is used to help us discern what the meaning of the noun form is?
9. Re: *Fact #9* — *katastello* (the verb form) is used in Acts to describe a rioting crowd becoming calmed, quieted, or otherwise restrained from some sort of undesirable action. Is it really true that the noun form of that word simply refers to a garment?
10. Re: *Fact #10* — If Paul intended to speak of a garment, why did he not just use one of the typical words for garments used throughout the NT? Notably, when he told them what *not* to wear, he *did* use such a word.

11. Re: *Fact #11* — If *katastole* really is a garment of some sort, why is it the only one from the Greek Scriptures which doesn't seem to have any corroborating evidence of its existence in ancient Greco-Roman literature or art? (all the other such words do have such evidence).
12. Re: *Facts #12* — Does our current understanding of 1 Tim 2:9 harmonize with 1 Peter 3:3-5? Our understanding of these two passages must agree before we can have confidence that we understand them correctly.

There may be adequate answers for these questions in the traditional understanding of the 1 Timothy passage. However, we cannot simply pretend that such questions do not matter. Nor do I believe that the honest Bible student will consider these questions out of line.

PARAMETERS FOR RESOLUTION

...Some contextual requirements that the best interpretation must meet in order for us to be able to have confidence that our understanding is indeed accurate. Here again, I believe there should be agreement on these things, since they are based on how any passage of Scripture must be interpreted.

The correct understanding of any passage of Scripture must include attention to the context of that passage. That context must be on several levels, starting first with the immediate context (the surrounding verses), the document context (the same book/author) the Biblical context (how it fits into the whole of God's Word), the linguistic context (the language in which it was written) and the historical/cultural context (to whom, when, and in what culture it was written).

Applying these parameters to the 1 Timothy 2:8-12 passage, I would name these requirements to be true of any interpretation which anyone would put forth as the accurate and true understanding of Paul's instructions:

1. The interpretation must demonstrate the logical connection between the instructions to men (v.8) and the instructions to women (v.9-12).
2. The interpretation should reflect the etymological connection between *kosmeo* and *kosmios* if at all possible, since that is a connection that would have been obvious to Paul's original audience.
3. The understanding of the word *katastole* must somehow be broad enough to encompass both personal decoration (jewelry, hair, and clothing) and personal actions (good works).
4. The passage in 1 Timothy 2:8-12 must be in harmony with 1 Peter 3:3-5. These two passages are simply too similar to leave any room for distinct meanings.

DEFICIENCIES & ANOMALIES

IN THE TRADITIONAL TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

...The traditional interpretation, and the translation it is based upon is wanting with regards to the Parameters for Resolution. This is because it does not adequately answer the questions raised by the facts presented, nor does it meet the contextual requirements of a good translation/interpretation.

The traditional understanding of 1 Timothy 2:9 has been that Paul is especially emphasizing the need for women to dress modestly. This is generally understood as being for the purpose of not causing a man to lust after her body if she were to be inadequately clothed. Some teachers are careful to emphasize Paul's instruction that women must not "over-dress," but this seems to be a lesser emphasis among those who hold the traditional view.

I find this understanding to fail in regards to the Parameters for Resolution laid out above for the following reasons (regarding each of the four points):

1. There is no clear logical connection between the instructions to men and the instructions to women. I've never read nor heard anyone offer any explanation with reference to this question when teaching on this passage. The only possible comparison that I can think of is this: Men are to raise "holy hands" and women are to dress in a "holy" (modest) manner.

I find even this suggestion to be very inadequate because there is actually no reference to holiness for women in this passage at all. This is especially clear when you consider that the core meaning of the term translated "modest" — *kosmios* — has to do with "order" and not "separateness" (the root meaning of "holy").

2. The meanings of the words, "adorn" and "modest" in English are too distinct to be considered similar at all. Dictionary.com defines "adorn" as "to decorate or add beauty." This would seem to be in direct conflict with Paul's instructions regarding *not* over-dressing using such typical "adornments" as jewelry, hairstyles, or expensive clothing. "Modest," on the other hand is defined as showing a moderate estimate of one's own worth.

Not only do these two words fail to carry similar meaning, they actually lean towards having conflicting meaning. For this reason, I do not believe they represent the original Greek words or Paul's intended meaning well.

3. The translations of the Greek word *katastole* as "apparel" or "clothing" limits its scope to items worn externally on the body. These English words give no place for the inclusion of "good works" as part of their meaning.

In fact, it makes Paul's words sound almost nonsensical because if he is telling the women to wear "modest apparel," his explanation does not fit his words. Paul expands on his instructions by telling them what "modest apparel" *is not*, followed by what it *is*. The "*is not*" part seems to fit, because the items mentioned are indeed things which can be worn (or how the hair is worn). By contrast, however, the "*is*" part makes no mention of clothing at all, but rather requires *actions* in the form of "good works."

4. 1 Peter 3:3a could — and perhaps *should* — be translated: "*Your adornment must not be external — braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses;*" ("merely" was added by the NASB translators) There is a clear de-

emphasis on clothing.

Yet in 1 Timothy, Paul's words have generally been understood to be an emphasis on clothing. If that were so, then the emphases of these two passages seem to be in conflict... Perhaps not irreconcilably, but they are clearly not in whole agreement as 1 Timothy has traditionally been understood.

I conclude therefore that with respect to all four Parameters for Resolution, the traditional translation/interpretation is wanting. However, I do recognize that if I cannot offer a more plausible translation and interpretation which does in fact fulfill the Parameters for Resolution, I have really offered very little to the issue other than questions.

AN ALTERNATE TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

...An alternative translation and interpretation based upon the etymology of the words, and the Scriptural context. Obviously, if the traditional understanding is wanting, a better alternative needs to be supplied.

Here is 1 Timothy 2:9 in the NASB, but with the Greek terms in the place of the words whose accuracy is in question:

*Likewise, I want women to **kosmeo** themselves with **kosmios katastole**, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments,...*

First of all, the connection between *kosmeo* and *kosmios* is very clearly seen now. And since the root word from which both of these words are derived is *kosmos*, meaning "order," it seems that the best first step is to use derivatives of the English word, "order" to put in their places and see if the meaning of the passage is sensible:

*Likewise, I want women to **order** (verb) themselves with **ordered** [or **orderly**] (adj.) **katastole**, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments,...*

While we do not normally use those terms that way in common speech, I find the meaning of the passage to be clear and sensible. In fact, I find it to be more comprehensive in scope of application than the word "adorn" allows, and I would suggest that this was Paul's intent.

Let me offer some additional terms which I think might help convey with more detail what I believe Paul is intending to communicate. Following the pattern of the *Amplified Bible*, I will place the "extra" words in brackets:

*Likewise, I want women to **order** [arrange, prepare, present, comport, carry] themselves...*

I believe that Paul's instructions have to do with everything about how a woman interacts with others, not simply her attire. Consider what *Vine's Dictionary of Greek Words* has to say about the word (emphasis and words in brackets mine):

The well-ordering is not of dress and demeanor only, but of the inner life, uttering indeed and expressing itself in the outward conversation [way of life].

Ultimately, my opinion is that the word “*present*” may most fully capture Paul’s intent in a single English word, but even that still seems to be lacking some of the meaning of “order,” because that “ordering” seems to be the result of intention, forethought, and design. So I will suggest the addition of an adverb to modify and expand the verb’s meaning: “*intentionally present.*”

Looking next to the adjective, *kosmios*, I find richness in the meaning expressed by the words “ordered” or “orderly.” Again, I will offer additional (“amplified”) words to the text to try and capture more of what I perceive as the meaning of the word “ordered” as used by the author:

*Likewise, I want women to **order** themselves with **ordered** [arranged, designed, intentional, prepared, thoughtful, organized] **katastole**,*

Here, I could see several of those words working well as a suitable translation for *kosmios*, depending in large measure upon the true meaning of the word *katastole*. My initial leaning would be to use the word “intentional” so that there is a clear relationship between “intentionally present” (suggested above as a suitable translation of *kosmeo*) and the translation here of *kosmios*. However, before finalizing a suggested translation, I need to explore the meaning of the word *katastole*.

First of all, I submit that since this word only appears once in all of the NT, then we need to consider the etymology of this word to be very significant in determining its true meaning.

Strong’s concordance indicates that the noun, *katastole*, comes from the verb, *katastello*. This word is further broken down into the prefix *kata-* and the verb, *stello*.

Kata- is defined as meaning “down, against, according to.” It seems to indicate a closeness in proximity with a downward emphasis. *Stello* is defined as “to arrange, prepare, gather up” and “to restrain.” It was used in the “furling” of the sails on a boat, gathering them all together, and taking them out of use. When combined as *katastello*, it can then be seen why Strong’s defines the word as “to keep down.” It’s usage in Acts 19:35-36 fits this etymological understanding perfectly, for the men of Ephesus were rioting and needed to “calm down” or be “restrained.”

Katastole is the noun form of that verb. Therefore, it makes the most sense to consider a definition which reflects a related meaning. It follows then that word might actually mean “calm,” “quiet” or “restraint.” Obviously, such a definition is vastly different from how this term has heretofore been translated into English.

I find little etymological basis for translating *katastole* as “clothing.” There is no “common usage” evidence in the NT or other ancient documents (that I have been able to find) that it is a kind of garment. The only indication from the context seems to be Paul’s instructions regarding what *not* to wear as he completes the sentence. However, the very next verse

counters that idea by declaring that the fulfillment of Paul's command is not to be found in clothing, but in action.

The next question then is to consider if a translation based upon the etymology of the word actually makes sense within the context of Paul's instructions.

The etymology of *katastole* leads me to consider the word "restraint" as a possible translation of the word. Given the fact that this passage is addressed to women and how they are to "order themselves," I would add the reflexive pronoun as a prefix, "*self-restraint*." This captures both the context, and the prefix *kata-* as part of the translation.

So, if I used the words that I have suggested for the translation, we read the following:

8 Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. 9 Likewise, I want women to intentionally present themselves with intentional self-restraint, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, 10 but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. 11 A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. 12 But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.
[NASB, adapted]

TESTING THE NEW TRANSLATION AGAINST THE PARAMETERS FOR RESOLUTION

...Any valid translation/interpretation must meet the Parameters for Resolution or be rejected as untenable. Here we see that the alternate translation and its consequent interpretation does indeed meet the standards that we set forth.

As I consider this translation and its meaning under the Parameters for Resolution above, I find the meaning clear and sensible, and I believe that it meets the Parameters for the following reasons:

1. It makes much clearer the similarity of instructions given to the men and the women. The men must restrain their anger and their conflicts with others. The women must restrain themselves in their social interaction and their place in the church.
2. It reflects the natural relationship between *kosmeo* and *kosmios*, and more clearly captures the concept of "order" which is the root meaning of both of those terms.
3. The meaning of the word *katastole* (translated here as "self-restraint") clearly has application both to how a woman dresses and how she behaves.
4. A comparison of this passage and the 1 Peter 3:3-5 passage now shows very clear harmony between them. Both passages forbid the usage of clothing for the promoting of one's self, and both commend women for submitting to the leadership of men, either in the church (1 Tim), or their husbands (1 Peter).

The 4 points above meet the requirements set forth above in the "Parameters for Resolution." But I find that there is another very significant affirmation of this translation in the immediate context. So I also submit reason #5 here:

5. Typically, we have considered 1 Timothy 2:9 to be first a set of instructions to a woman about the importance of modesty in her attire, followed by a separate set of instructions about submissiveness, not having authority, and remaining quiet. However, with the translation that I've suggested, it is clear that the passage is not two different and seemingly unrelated commands, but rather a single command with applications to attire, conduct, attitude, role, and demeanor.

To me, this is a strong affirmation of the correctness of this translation.

When I had concluded my study, I compared the new translation to some other translations and paraphrases. I was somewhat surprised to discover the following rendering of the passage in *The Message* (emphasis mine):

*Since prayer is at the bottom of all this, what I want mostly is for men to pray—not shaking angry fists at enemies but raising holy hands to God. **And I want women to get in there with the men in humility before God**, not primping before a mirror or chasing the latest fashions but doing something beautiful for God and becoming beautiful doing it. 11-12 I don't let women take over and tell the men what to do. They should study to be quiet and obedient along with everyone else. [The Message]*

I found it affirming to note that Eugene Peterson made certain to tie together the instructions to men and women, considering them both to be commands towards humility. It is notable that he completely omitted any reference to how women are supposed to dress.

CONCLUSION

My purpose has been to more clearly understand God's Word, and to bring to light an understanding which has been flawed due to an English translation that has been less than precise. Clearly the first step in knowing how to apply Scripture to our lives is to have confidence that we understand its meaning correctly. To this end, I have written this article.

I welcome any review for accuracy and scholarship.

DEM
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