

Evaluating the NIV11's Translation of αυθεντειν in 1 Timothy 2:12

*I do not permit a woman to teach or **to assume authority** over a man.* (1 Timothy 2:12, NIV11)

First let me stipulate for the record that if I were a one-man translation committee, I would have translated the above verse, "I do not permit a woman to teach or *to have authority* over a man." I say this on the basis of the narrower context of the line of thought in the book, the wider context of Paul's writings, and the even wider context of biblical teaching on this subject. I would prefer this translation (which also appears in the NIV84) to the one that now appears in the NIV11.

No doubt most pastors of WELS would agree with what I have written above. But it is also fair to say that there is considerably more debate among us as to how to evaluate the NIV11's translation. Is it simply incorrect? Worse, does it teach false doctrine or allow false doctrine to be taught? Does it "tilt the scales" in the favor of evangelical feminists who are trying to undermine the teachings of God's Word regarding the God-given callings of men and women?¹

The key matter for us as a synod, I believe, is to keep our focus on whether or not the translation teaches false doctrine. Finally that has to be the issue over which a translation stands or falls. But before we discuss that issue, it might be worth some time simply trying to answer the question, "Is the NIV11's rendering at all justifiable?" It seems to me that when people answer this question in the negative, it then raises in their mind the additional question, "Why then would the Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) adopt an unwarranted translation of this verse?" All manner of motivations can then be ascribed to them. On the other hand, answering the question in the affirmative might reduce the high level of emotion that tends to arise whenever people discuss how the CBT has handled this passage.

At issue of course is the translation of the Greek verb αυθεντειν. More scholarly ink has been spilled on this word in recent times than almost any other I can think of. Clearly New Testament scholars have not reached consensus on it. I don't intend to sift through all the discussion here. Since I have already stated my translational preference above, no one can be in any doubt as to where I stand. But that is not the same as saying, "I believe the NIV11's translation is unjustifiable."

Over twenty years ago, a feminist theologian tried to make the case for the word having an erotic connotation. In his masterful article "ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΙΝ—A Word Study," Professor Armin Panning carefully debunked that notion, establishing that only the traditional renderings (among which he included 'have authority,' 'exercise authority,' 'usurp authority,' 'dictate,' or 'domineer') made any linguistic sense.² The discussion has moved on since that time. Nobody really argues for the word's having a sexual

¹ A charge made by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) in their evaluation of gender language in the NIV 2011. See

https://www.cbmw.org/images/articles_pdf/cbmw%20final%20analysis%20of%202011%20niv.pdf, pp 6-7.

² *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 78 (electronic edition.). Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (185–192). Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House.

connotation anymore. Everyone agrees that the verb's meaning involves the use of authority. The issue has now become one of determining, "How exactly does Paul envision that use of authority being carried out?" Here are the options:

1. Paul is using the word in what we might call a *positive* sense. He is speaking about the mere use of authority in teaching the Word. There is nothing wrong with teaching. There is nothing wrong with teaching in an authoritative way. Paul means to forbid to women the exercise of this authoritative teaching office over men.
2. Paul is using the word in a more *negative* sense. He is using a word that has a bit of an edge to it. He portrays this activity as a usurpation, where women are acting in a dictatorial or domineering way. They lord it over men.

Long before feminist or egalitarian³ interpretations arose in the church, orthodox scholars have differed over whether to take the verb positively or negatively. As you can see from his article, Professor Panning left both possibilities open, even though it appears he favored the first option.

What has made the matter more contentious in recent years is that egalitarian theologians have focused on the second option with its more negative connotations and have said, "Paul is not prohibiting women from any and all teaching of men; he is only saying that such teaching is wrong when women do it in a domineering or dictatorial way, or when they willfully arrogate the office of authoritative teaching to themselves." This in turn has led some complementarian⁴ theologians—out of what is no doubt a wholesome desire to preserve God's will for the distinct callings of men and women—to deny even the possibility of a negative connotation here. To admit the possibility is to leave the door wide open, in their view, for an egalitarian interpretation.⁵

The NIV11's Committee on Biblical Translation, on the other hand, sees its rendering of 'assume authority' as an attempt to occupy the middle ground on the issue. Noting that the scholarly debate has not yet arrived at consensus, the committee wanted to find a translation in which a biblical interpreter could construe the verb either positively or negatively.⁶ They have reacted against the criticisms of the CBMW by pointing out that complementarian scholars as well as egalitarian scholars have been content with the translation 'assume authority.' It was, in fact, John Calvin's rendering long before the matter was even debated. The CBT thus rejects the attempt of the CBMW to identify their translation with feminist ideology as a case of 'guilt by association labeling.'⁷

³ An egalitarian theologian is one who believes that Paul's instructions on men and women here were intended only for his time and culture. They would argue against using this verse to prohibit women from teaching men in an authoritative way as pastors, for example.

⁴ A complementarian theologian is one who believes that Paul's instructions on men and women were intended for all times and cultures.

⁵ Again, consult the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood's article on the NIV 2011, as cited above.

⁶ See the CBT's "Translator's Notes" at <http://www.niv-cbt.org/niv-2011-overview/translators-notes/>.

⁷ See the CBT's "Brief Response" at <http://www.niv-cbt.org/wp-content/uploads/cbt-response-to-cbmw-review.pdf>.

How can one settle this? We can point to the standard Greek dictionaries. Most of them allow for both possibilities with some favoring the first while others favor the second shading. A person might suggest that if the meaning ‘assume authority’ is found in a standard, scholarly dictionary, this should be enough to settle the matter of its suitability for use in a translation of the Bible.⁸ But appeals to a dictionary as the final authority don’t seem to carry as much weight as once they used to. We’ve all become more aware of our own biases as well as more alert to bias in others. Suffice it to say that one cannot completely discount the possibility of bias in dictionaries. So the question remains, can we trust the dictionaries to guide us in this matter? Are there really two shades of meanings that are justifiable here, one positive and one negative? How do dictionaries arrive at their meanings anyway?

As any first year seminary student knows, the meaning of a word in a sentence is first of all established by a word’s common usage. Studying how a word is used in various places and by various authors establishes the range of meanings a given word might have. Secondly, a word’s precise meaning in a particular sentence is established by the words with which the word in question co-occurs. These are called a word’s collocates.

Let me illustrate. The English adjective “fresh” has a range of meanings in common use. It can mean ‘newly made or obtained’ or ‘not salty’ or ‘pure, cool, refreshing.’ I think we can all agree we are dealing with a word that seems to have a very broad range of possible meanings. But there is no ambiguity at all for us when we actually use ‘fresh’ with other words in a sentence. The collocates ‘fish,’ ‘water,’ and ‘air’ immediately narrow this wide range of possible meanings down to one. If I say, “I saw fresh fish for sale!” whoever listens to me will not think, “Oh, he’s seen some pure and refreshing fish in the market.”

Thirdly, if a language gives a speaker various choices in how to talk about a state or an activity, then those words may have slightly different connotations. If in English we want to say, “He took the life of another person,” we have a choice between ‘kill,’ ‘murder,’ or ‘slaughter’ to convey the idea. Though they all mean roughly the same thing, we know that there are nuances and overtones with each one of these words. To kill someone could be a crime, but doesn’t have to be. To murder him most certainly is, and to slaughter him automatically connotes a callousness and violence that is not necessarily there in ‘kill.’ If I choose ‘slaughter’ over ‘kill’ in describing such an act, I wish to place it in a certain light for the one listening to me.

Scholars and compilers of dictionaries look at all the possible examples they can come up with to establish a word’s various possible definitions. The more examples those scholars have of actual usage, the more widely they have ranged among the various dialects of a language, the more certain they can be in the definitions they give. The more examples I have of the word being used with various collocates in my dictionary, the more certain I can be when I use it to discover a word’s meaning in a particular sentence I am wondering about.

What does this all have to do with 1 Timothy 2:12? Simply this: the word *αυθεντειν*—translated ‘to assume authority’ by the NIV11—is used in this one place only in the entire Greek New Testament.

⁸ As in fact BDAG does.

What's more, the word's usage is relatively rare within the entire body of Greek literature. That means we simply don't have enough evidence to make a final judgment on the matter. We just don't have enough examples to work with. This is not to say that the meaning of the passage is obscure. It's rather a fairly narrow question of nuance. As I said before, we have no doubt that Paul is talking about the use of authority—women over men—in this passage. The only thing about which we lack perfect clarity is what kind of 'spin' this particular verb has—whether a positive one or a negative one.

I remain convinced as I consider the two possibilities that the positive meaning—'to have authority' or 'to exercise authority'—is the more justifiable one exegetically. It fits best in Paul's line of thought. There is strong syntactical⁹ evidence to support it as well. But I cannot go so far as to say that a negative meaning is impossible or that it completely lacks justification.

From what I've said above about the way scholars compile meanings for dictionaries, I believe it is a fair and linguistically justifiable argument to say, "Paul had available to him other words or phrases he could have used besides αυθεντειν.¹⁰ He uses them elsewhere in his writings when he wants to speak about the positive exercise of authority. The fact that he uses αυθεντειν may mean that he wanted to put a particular spin on the idea, in this case a negative one."

To sum up: it is difficult for me to say that the NIV11's translation is flat out incorrect as some do. The word is a rare one. Many scholars (not all of them egalitarians) recognize the possibility that it may have a negative spin to it. Many did so long before there was any debate on the appropriate callings for men and women, such as the KJV. There is linguistic justification for such a position. That's why it is listed as an option in the standard Greek dictionary of the New Testament. Even though I disagree with the CBT's decision, I can see why they hit upon the translation 'assume authority' and have no reason to doubt their motivation as being something other than what they themselves have said. They felt it was a happy compromise that allowed the biblical interpreter to view the word in either a positive or a negative light.

But does the NIV11's translation teach false doctrine? That I believe is the real question. And the answer to it seems to me to be, "No." I do not find the CBMW's argument convincing when they say that 'assume authority' must be understood as 'assume authority on one's own initiative.'¹¹ If I would say in a conversation, "The president assumed office today," would anyone think, "He means the president is assuming office *on his own initiative*"? I have a hard time believing it.

In fact, I think that if a reader—unaware of this entire egalitarian/complementarian debate—were simply to read this entire passage in context, he or she would most likely think, "Paul does not want women to teach men in an authoritative way." What is more, I fail to see any great difficulty involved in explaining the truth of God's Word from this passage—even with NIV11's wording. Quite frankly, this is

⁹When ουδε joins up two verbs, as it does in this passage, it seems to be a general rule that it either joins up two verbs with negative connotations, or two verbs with positive connotations. But it is not used to mix a negative with positive. Since διδασκειν is a verb with positive connotations, αυθεντειν is likely to be positive, too.

¹⁰ Εξουσιαζειν or εχειν εξουσιαν.

¹¹ See the previously cited article.

a section of Scripture that often requires careful, pastoral explanation in any case. That's one more reason why I am so happy that our pastors can work with the original languages.

Finally, even if one takes the word—and the NIV11's rendering 'assume authority'—in a negative way, such an understanding would hardly constitute false doctrine taken all by itself. After all, in a former era pastors taught the truth from the KJV's decidedly negative 'usurp authority.' I see no reason why a person couldn't explain such a negative spin by saying, "Paul is expressing his disgust at the whole notion of women in teaching authority over men by using such a strong verb."

The CBMW overstates the case when it claims that the NIV11 translation of 1 Timothy 2:12 will give "an open door" to women pastors since "in one stroke it removes the Bible's main barrier to women pastors and elders. As soon as a church adopts the 2011 NIV, the debate over women's roles in that church will be over."(p.6,21). The NIV11 still says that the husband/man is the head of the wife/woman. The NIV11 still says that the overseer in the church is to be "faithful to his wife." How has a wide open door been given to women pastors when NIV11 says these things? Just as gender roles could be taught on the basis of the KJV, in spite of "usurp authority" in 1 Timothy 2:12, so it will be possible to teach gender roles on the basis of NIV11.

In short, I do not see NIV11's translation of 1 Timothy 2:12 as a deal breaker so far as our decision of whether or not to adopt the NIV11 for use in our publications.

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