

## IMPERATIVAL INTENT

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### I. Description of Imperatival Intent

Imperative forms can convey a range of meanings; they have **(1) varied quality**. In language, authorial intent does not bear a one-to-one relationship with linguistic forms. In assessing a writer's use of the imperative mood, we look beyond the form itself and infer its force from the near and distant literary context, the historical context, and the nature of the case.

(a) Imperatives may entreat, where one wants a benefit.

(b) Imperatives may advise, where for purposes of communication the speaker treats the hearers as a personal equals. If they do not take the advice, they run a risk, because advice is rooted simply in the nature of the case.<sup>1</sup>

(c) Imperatives may exhort. Entreaty does not impact women's studies, and exhortation is an extension of advice and commandment. Imperatival intent in women's studies addresses the distinction between advice and commandment.

(d) Imperatives may mandate. If people do not do a command, they disobey, because mandates are rooted in the authority of the speaker, not just in the nature of the case.

Entreaties, advice, mandates, and exhortations involve imperatives used within an **(2) assumed limitation**. The implied limitation may consist of the intended topic. Here the danger is that a reader may apply the command to matters beyond the author's frame of reference (cp. essay on "Notations on 1 Timothy 2:11-12"). The implied limitation may consist of some assumed condition in the setting—in the person, the congregation, or the culture. "[If this is the way you are going to act at agape feasts], eat at home" (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:22). The frame of reference may consist of some overriding purpose beyond the directive. "[Even though slavery is not an appropriate condition to force another person into,] slaves, submit yourselves to your masters so God's name will not be blasphemed" (1 Timothy 6:1; cp. Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; Titus 1:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-25). "[If this is what it means to other people], don't eat shamble meat; [you may communicate the wrong thing and thereby confuse a disbeliever or tempt a weaker brother]" (1 Corinthians 8; 10:23-11:1; contrast Acts 15:19-21, 28-29). "[Lest you bring disrepute on the fledgling Christian community,] do not take another Christian to court for cheating you" (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:1-7). The implied limitation may consist of a standard situation. "An elder should have faithful children" (1 Timothy 3:4-5, 12; Titus 1:6). The implied limitation may consist of a significant generality with understood exceptions. "Submit to every human ordinance for the Lord's sake" (1 Peter 2:13; contrast Acts 4:16-20; 5:29). Aside from those topics, conditions, purposes, situations, or generalities, the imperatives may not apply. Legitimately applying imperatives beyond their original frame of reference requires proper generalization.

Implied limitation corresponds with **(3) intended audience**. An imperative may address God's people in any age, but it may also belong only to people in one dispensation: "Bring the whole tithe into the store house" (Malachi 3:10). Imperatives may pertain only to people in the

contemporary culture: “*Salute each other with a holy kiss*” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). Imperatives may pertain only to people in an assumed special setting: “*Don’t look for a wife [while ministering in this time of duress]*” (1 Corinthians 7:27).

Our practical response to biblical imperatives depends on the author’s intent, the assumed setting, and the audience addressed. Imperatives do not apply in every sense or circumstance.

These observations have a bearing on reading New Testament imperatives about female behavior. When we read an imperative verb about women, we do not automatically take it as an absolute mandate addressed to us. We consider both the quality of the imperative and its frame of reference before we decide what we should do. The question is not the reliability and authority of scripture but its meaning and relevance. As not every example is a precedent, so not every command is a mandate.

To illustrate the qualifying impact of imperatival intent, we offer an example from everyday life. It is about an hour before dinner, and Mom notices that there is no bread in the cupboard. She gives her twelve-year-old son a five-dollar bill and says, “*Take your bicycle and go down to the convenience store and buy a loaf of bread for dinner.*” As he gets to the end of the driveway, however, he meets the neighbor lady backing out. When he finds out that she is going to the supermarket for a few groceries, he rides with her to the supermarket and buys two loaves of French bread.

Has he disobeyed his mother? He bought two loaves rather than one, he bought French bread rather than regular bread, he went in the neighbor’s car instead of riding his bicycle, and he went to the supermarket, not the convenience store. We would surely judge that he did not disobey her even though he did not do what she told him. Bread is cheaper at the supermarket, so he can get two loaves of French bread for half again as much; he knows that his family uses enough bread that the second loaf will not go to waste. He gets two loaves because there will be six people eating supper, so one loaf would be “cutting it close”; he supposes that his mother said one loaf only because she did not want to pay a high price for regular bread. Furthermore, he knows the family is having spaghetti for dinner, and they normally have French bread with spaghetti; so he surmises that she just said bread because the convenience store does not carry French bread. Going in the neighbor’s car will not make him late getting the bread for dinner; and the neighbor is a friend he knows the family trusts, so there is no danger. He judges that his mother told him to ride his bike only because the convenience store was three blocks away, which might make it a fairly long walk there and back, and because she was not taking into consideration the fact that the neighbor was about to leave for the supermarket. He supposes that she told him to go to the convenience store because the supermarket is two miles away on the other side of two busy, four-lane streets.

In each part of this example, the son’s decisions derive from his knowledge of the nature of the case, knowledge he gained from experience rather than from his mother’s statement. We say he has obeyed the spirit of her words; he has conformed his action to her imperatival intent. He does not deserve to be disciplined.

The difficulty with women’s studies, however, is that we are not as certain about the nature of the case as the twelve-year-old boy was about buying bread. Personal relationships across gender differences is complicated, and human experience is unclear. We fear also that we

have some blind spots in gender relationships because of personal and cultural perversions. Moreover, there is limited biblical information on this subject, and it contains seemingly foreign elements like veil-wearing and silence behavior, which seem unnatural or extreme to us. In addition, we can see two levels to the male-female relationship issue—a choice between (1) egalitarianism and hierarchy and between the female submission principle itself in hierarchy as distinguished from (2) the cultural manifestations of that principle. The imperative intent in statements about manifestation of the female submission principle is not necessarily the same as the imperative intent about the submission principle itself—as imperatives about veil-wearing apparently show. Likewise, imperative intent in statements about the female submission principle is not necessarily to require the female submission principle *per se*—as imperatives about slavery submission show.

Apparently we can somehow get behind the imperatives themselves and look at other information that has implications for the authors' imperative intent. Other information includes relevant didactic material about the nature of men and women or about any difference in God's intended purposes he states for them. Historical information about what women did with divine approval may help. Human experience also has its place as long as we make the bases for judgments as broad as possible.

## II. Application of Imperative Intent in 1 Timothy 2:11-12

1 Timothy 2:11: *“Let a woman learn in quietness with complete subjection.”*

Does this directive stand within an assumed limitation of Mediterranean culture because silence communicated subjection so female deference communicated female submission?

1 Timothy 2:12: *“I do not allow a woman to teach, or exercise authority over, a man but to be in quietness”* [common direct object], or *“I do not allow a woman to teach, nor [do I allow a woman] to exercise authority over a man . . .”* [direct object of second verb only].

If the descriptive-form statement is, in fact, meant as a prescriptive statement, is the directive given within an **assumed limitation** on “teach” in the sense of normative teaching vs. shedding influence?

Is the directive meant in the **assumed limitation** of the day because teaching then was viewed a directive and authoritative? If so, teaching in a setting where people do not invest it with supervisory authority would be outside Paul's frame of reference.

Is the directive given because in the **assumed limitation** quietness communicated subjection and teaching would not be quietness?

Is the directive given in an **assumed limitation** because in contemporary cultural women were not usually well educated, and their teaching, especially in a manner or circumstance that implied authority, would be “out of place”?

Is the effective value of the word γυνή (*gynē*) “wife” or “woman”? The question is not so much whether we translate the word as “woman,” but whether Paul has in mind a **standard situation**, that is, a married woman—in effect a wife.

Despite the descriptive form of his statement, does Paul mean his (equivalent to an) imperative as **advice** or **commandment**? Advice would mean that doing otherwise would not be disobeying Paul but risking problems he wanted them to avoid. In effect, the directive would mean that letting women teach men was not advisable. This quality of the comment could allow the practice of a strong generality vs. an absolute uniformity. The advice-imperative could be

based on all the natural, specific-situational, and general-cultural factors that would lead to a practical conclusion that a woman should not teach.

Even if Paul did mean **commandment** vs. advice in the culture he was originally addressing, would he have reduced it to advice in a setting like ours, a setting that may lie outside his **assumed limitation**? So to speak, do some commands reduce to advice or suggestion—or even zero—in settings different from the original one? The New Testament letters, especially the pastorals, have had to serve two roles: they are (1) vehicles of timeless truth, and they were (2) vehicles of situational practice. The principles in the former led to applications in the latter; consequently, we must understand the principles of the former when we apply them to different circumstances.

The pastorals give imperatives about practical matters all the way from ideal practice through practice in already perverted situations down to the level of what sounds like bylaw material: “Don’t enroll a widow under sixty years old” (1 Timothy 5:9). Would the readers have disobeyed by enrolling a widow that was fifty-five? Even if they would have been disobedient, would we be disobedient in using sixty-five as a “soft” minimum, because of the greater longevity in modern America? These letters use imperatives that express generalities with untold exceptions: “*Refuse [to enroll] younger widows because they will become self-indulgent . . . idle, tattlers and busybodies . . .*” (1 Timothy 5:11-13). Would the Ephesian Christians have been disobeying Paul by not paying one of the elders who ruled well and labored in the word (1 Timothy 5:17)? Since Paul tells him not to receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses, would Timothy have been disobeyed in receiving such an accusation by one reliable witness on a crucial matter (1 Timothy 5:19)? Could there have been circumstances where a recent Jewish convert like Paul or Apollos could immediately become involved in the formal leadership ministry of the church (1 Timothy 5:22; cp. Acts 9:1-25; 18:24-28)? What if Timothy preferred not to risk addiction by heeding Paul’s imperative on the medicinal use of wine for his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23)? Does Paul approve of slavery by telling slaves to respect their masters (1 Timothy 6:1)? Is it disobedience for men not to raise their hands when they pray (2:8) or for women to braid their hair (2:9)? Did Paul himself disobey his own imperative against circumcising Gentiles when he circumcised Timothy (note Acts 15:1-29 + 16:1-3 + 4)? These examples are not all exactly like the imperatives on female formal leadership over men; there is more to implementing Paul’s ancient directives in our modern situation than merely observing that he uses the imperatives in regard to them. After all, it would be disobedience for Timothy not to exercise himself to godliness even if he were living today (1 Timothy 4:7).

#### End Note

<sup>1</sup>“Nature of the case” means more than the creatable, or substantive, nature of something. It includes relational and active aspects—substance, action, and relationship being the fundamental components of every reality. Purpose is one aspect down inside the relational category; consequently, when we speak of “the nature of the case,” we include more than is discernible on an empirical basis, because empirical evidence is rooted only in the creatable nature and what it makes possible. But there is not a one-for-one relationship between purpose and creatable nature when it comes to humankind; otherwise, we would be locked into positive determinism rather than just restrictive determinism. Human nature is more variable than the divine purposes for humans. Consequently, clinical observation cannot always determine how people should act to be well pleasing to God. What is pleasing to him rests more directly on his

purposes for people than on the created nature people have in consequence of the divine purpose it reflects.

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