

When it comes to understanding Biblical teaching on the role of women in the church, there seems to be danger on every side. First, there is the danger of controversy. Few issues have brought more division in the last 30 years than the role of women in the church. Second, there is the danger of letting culture overrule Scripture. No matter how they are understood, God's instructions for women stand against the prevailing attitudes of contemporary society. To the post-modern ear 1Timothy 2:11-12 sounds like gender discrimination. Third, there is the danger of allowing church history to dictate how the Bible should be applied. When questions arise about the role of women in ministry, some churches say, "We've never done it that way before". As a result, the spiritual gifts of women often have been marginalized, to the impoverishment of the church. Finally, there are difficulties with the text itself. What do the words "in quietness", "full submission", "teach" and "have authority" mean? Then there are further questions: What is the precise relevance of Eve's deception (v.14). Or what can it possibly mean to say that "women will be saved through childbearing" (v.15)? There are no simple answers. We need to proceed to consider the passage, recognizing that we bring prior assumptions to it, asking the Holy Spirit to correct those assumptions as necessary and working through the passage as carefully as possible.

1. To Learn and to Submit

Paul begins, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission" (v.11). With this statement, Paul shatters the conventions of his day. In the Roman world, women were considered to be intellectually second-class. The educational system was designed primarily for men. If possible, the Jewish rabbis were even more chauvinistic - educating women was regarded as a waste of time. The Word of God says nearly the opposite of what many Jews and Romans said. Before he makes any prohibition, the apostle Paul writes a word of liberation: "Let a woman learn". Because a woman is a human being made with a mind in his image, God requires her to learn. "A woman should learn" - it is her responsibility before God to become a student of God's Word. As Christians, we ought to take great encouragement from what Biblical truth has done to improve the status of women. The church has not always lived up to what the Bible says about gender, but whenever it has, women have been greatly blessed.

If a woman must learn, how should she do it? "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission". The Greek word translated "quietness" in v.11 is repeated at the end of v.12 and translated "silent" in the NIV. "Quiet" is a much better translation than "silent". The word does not mean that women have to keep their mouths shut. Rather, it refers to a gentle demeanour. Also women are to learn in full "submission". To submit is to be obedient, to yield to authority. Here it means to respect the leadership and authority that God has given to the elders of the church. It means to receive their teaching in a spirit of cheerful agreement. When these two words are put together - "quietness" and "submission" - they describe the only way any person - whether male or female - can learn at all. It is impossible to teach someone who is talking all the time. And learning also requires a teachable spirit. It is impossible to teach someone who thinks he or she knows all the answers already. To learn is to submit to the knowledge and authority of the teacher.

A wonderful example of this kind of submissive learning is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. While Martha "was distracted by all the preparations" (Luke 10:40), Mary sat at the feet of the Lord Jesus listening to what he said (Luke 10:39). The Lord replied to Martha's exasperated complaining by saying, "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). The words of Jesus confirm the dignity and necessity of women becoming students of the Bible - the Word of God. Mary was learning from Jesus true doctrine and how to apply it in daily life. God wanted women as well as men to be knowledgeable in the Scriptures and sound in their theology. Notice the way Mary learned: She "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said" (Luke 10:39). Mary

learned in the rabbinic style. She kept her place. She was listening rather than talking. She was sitting at Jesus' feet, which was the place of submission to teaching authority. She sat learning "in quietness and full submission". This is the way all God's people learn. They sit at the feet of their Lord and Master, even when he is speaking through the voice of a minister. When I have the joy and privilege of hearing other men preach, my aim is to learn in quietness and full submission. I strive to resist the urge to say, "Well, that's not quite how I would handle the text". Rather I must submit, not so much to another minister, but to the Lord himself, who wants me to sit at his feet the way Mary did.

Notice Paul says that women should learn in "full submission". Anything less than full submission is no submission at all. Partial submission leaves room to manipulate and control. Grudging submission reserves the right to grumble - leaving room for resentment and bitterness. But true submission is total submission. It is a heart surrendered to God. The best place to understand the beauty of submission is in the example of Jesus Christ. Between God the Father and God the Son there is the most perfect equality - they are equal in power and glory. Nevertheless the Son submitted to the will of the Father, even to his death on the cross. In the cross of Christ we see that submission is willing, voluntary obedience to God's will for God's glory. The relationship of the Son to the Father is a helpful analogy for understanding the relationship of women to men in God's house. Like the Son in his relationship to the Father, men and women are equal in their essence - both are created in the image of God and both are redeemed by the blood of Christ. At the same time, and without denying their fundamental equality, God commands wives to submit to their husbands and women to submit to the elected in the church. To submit in this way is to be like Jesus Christ. This is why the women of the church must never let go of God's command to learn in full submission. Whenever they put this command into practice, they display the character of Jesus Christ.

2. But Not to Preach or Exercise Authority

Paul's command in verse 11 is followed by a prohibition in v.12: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent ("remain quiet"). Verses 11 and 12 are joined together in the Greek by the conjunction, "but": women are to learn but not to teach. Does this mean that no woman should ever teach any man anything? When the apostle Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he quoted the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18). According to the prophecy of Joel and the preaching of Peter, all God's sons and daughters exercise a prophetic ministry. This doesn't mean that they are all called to serve the church in a teaching office, but they all bear witness to the gospel. In keeping with this principle Paul gave the following instructions to women as well as to men: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16). It is clear that at least certain kinds of teaching are to be carried out universally within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

However, there is at least one place where it is not appropriate for women to teach - and that is in the authoritative proclamation of God's Word in the context of the public worship of the church. We need to remember the context of Paul's command here. Right since the beginning of chapter 2 Paul has been giving Timothy instructions about corporate worship services. What he writes is not intended to govern men and women in every situation, but applies especially to those occasions when the church gathers for the preaching of the Word of God. The word Paul uses for "teach" here has a specific meaning in Paul's Pastoral Letters. It refers to the official teaching of sound doctrine - the fundamentals of the faith. Teaching is what Paul did in his official role as an apostle (1Timothy 2:7). It is also what the elders of the church are ordained to do (1Timothy 3:2, 5:17), which may explain why eldership is the next subject that Paul will address in his letter (3:1-7). To put it simply, the main thing that God forbids women to do is to preach.

One sign that Paul and the Holy Spirit have preaching in mind in verse 12 is the way that teaching is coordinated with having authority. The activity they most clearly suggest is preaching, or any other form of doctrinally authoritative teaching in the church. The Greek word Paul uses for “have or exercise authority” hints that church discipline also may be in view here. These things are the exclusive work of the elders of the church, the men called and appointed to provide spiritual oversight of God’s flock. All women are to submit to the teaching and discipline of the elders of the church. Of course, the men of the church who are not ordained elders must also submit to such teaching and discipline.

Depending on the discretion of the elders in a church, some teaching situations other than preaching may also fall under the category of teaching with authority. The training of elders, for example, or classes on fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. But elders are by no means required to teach every Bible study and Sunday school class in the church. Women and men who are not ordained may teach on a wide variety of biblical, historical and practical subjects. The elders are responsible before God for what is taught in the Bible studies and classes of the church, but they can exercise spiritual oversight without doing all of the teaching themselves.

It is important to emphasize that beyond this one biblical restriction, women are free to use their spiritual gifts to their fullest extent in the church. All positions of leadership and service are open to women, except for the authoritative teaching and disciplinary role that the Bible, in 1Timothy 2:12-14, reserves for men. In our Presbyterian form of church government that role is for the Session alone, composed of ruling and teaching elders. Aside from that function, women are encouraged to seek out all avenues of leadership and service, including Bible teaching in youth groups, Sunday School and other groups, leading small groups, serving on the various boards and committees of the church, in diaconal work and by any other means fully exercising their gifts for the greater benefit of the body of Christ.

3. Paul’s Reasons

Paul’s reasons for his command and prohibition in vv.11-12 go all the way back to the creation of the world - “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (vv.13-14). His first reason for telling women to learn but not to preach comes from the order of creation: Adam was formed first, then Eve” (v.13). Adam was God’s first-formed son. The fact that Adam was made first was not an accident - it was part of God’s best plan for humanity. The man was created before the woman to establish his headship or leadership in the relationship of the two. The woman was then formed from the man to achieve a unique intimacy, and for the man to create a certain kind of dependency. But nowhere does the Bible deduce from these facts about the origin of the woman that she is inferior, less valuable or less gifted than the man. Paul appeals to the created order, the good and perfect world God has made, to justify his prohibition. The effect of this appeal is to look beyond culture to creation. Paul’s second line of reasoning is more complex: “Adam was not the one deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (v.14). On a first reading, it sounds as if Paul blames Eve for the Fall. Thus some Christians have wrongly concluded that men should preach because woman cannot be trusted. The problem with this interpretation is that men cannot be trusted either. As we’ve already seen in 1Timothy 1, most of the problems in the Ephesian Church were caused by men who were teaching false doctrine. The true meaning of verse 14 lies in its emphasis on the word “deceived”, which Paul is taking from Genesis 3:13, “The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate”.” The point is that Adam was not deceived. Unlike Eve, he knew full well what he was doing when he ate the forbidden fruit. God had commanded him specifically not to “eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17). Eve was deceived. Adam, on the other hand, was not deceived but, deliberately and with understanding, chose to sin. Adam’s wilful disobedience indicates something important about God’s plan for humanity - namely, that God held Adam principally responsible for the fall into sin. This explains why, in Genesis 3:9, he asked Adam, rather than Eve, to

explain what had happened in the Garden. Adam tried to blame the whole thing on Eve, of course, but God came looking for the man. The same principle of spiritual responsibility was seen in our series on Romans last year. In Romans 5:14-15, Paul explains that “death reigned from Adam to Moses” and that “many died by the trespass of the one man”. Eve seems to be entirely forgotten, even though she was the first to sin. This is because Adam was the one chosen as our representative in the covenant. He was the man responsible for the spiritual welfare of the whole of humanity.

A similar spiritual responsibility has been given to men ordained to have teaching authority in the church. The Bible does not teach that men should preach because they will do a better job. The argument is sometimes made that women need to enter pastoral ministry because men are failing in their pastoral duties, or it is pointed out that some women are as gifted at speaking as many ministers. These objections fail because the Bible does not base its prohibition against women preaching on merit. It is based rather on the order God established at creation. The fall of Adam and Eve itself shows what can happen when that created order is reversed. Men and women who seek to overthrow God’s order for the church are sons and daughters of Eve. Like their mother, they become sinners.

4. Saved Through Childbirth

There is hope for sinners, however, and it comes in the most difficult verse in a difficult passage: “But women will be saved through childbearing - if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (v.15). It is not hard to guess why Paul introduces childbirth into the discussion. It is the one distinction between men and women that no one can deny is fundamental. Labour and delivery are unique to women, a divinely ordained fact which indicates that the differences between men and women are rooted in creation. Given this, what does it mean to be “saved through childbearing”? Obviously, the verse does not mean that a woman must give birth to be saved, for not all women give birth. One possibility is that these words promise Christian women that God will reverse the judgement pronounced on the woman by God in Genesis 3:16 by overcoming the pains of childbirth experienced as a penalty for sin. Instead she will be saved or kept safe, in the sense that the Lord will watch over her in giving birth. The first problem with this interpretation is that it is not always true. Some godly women - Rachel, Jacob’s wife, is an example from the Bible (Genesis 35:16-20) - have died in labour. But a bigger problem is that Paul typically uses this word for salvation in its spiritual sense of deliverance from sin. In the Pastoral Letters, “salvation” usually refers to redemption from sin through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Paul wished to speak about physical safety he uses a different word entirely.

Another possible interpretation emphasizes that in the original Greek, the word for “childbearing” has a definite article - it is referred to as the childbirth. So the verse reads, “women will be saved through the childbearing”. To be more specific, the verse may refer to the birth of Jesus Christ, even if this is a somewhat unconventional way of referring to that miraculous event. Walter Lock in his commentary put the verse into a poetic couplet that draws out its meaning on this interpretation: “A child from woman’s seed to spring; Shall saving to all women bring”. This interpretation makes good sense in connection with Genesis 3:15, which is the first statement of the gospel in the Bible, promising that the offspring of the woman will defeat the devil. Jesus accomplished this mainly by dying on the cross, of course, but he had to be born before he could die. And so, in this sense, salvation comes through (not by) his birth. The interpretation also makes good sense out of the immediate context. Verse 14 ends with the reality of sin. What could be more natural than for verse 15 to begin with the hope of salvation, in its usual sense of deliverance from sin? And to connect that salvation with the submission of a woman to the plan of God? Such considerations have led John Stott to conclude that “even if certain roles are not open to women, and even if they are tempted to resent their position, they and we must never forget what we owe to a woman. If Mary had not given birth to the Christ-child, there would have been no salvation for anybody. No greater honour has ever been given to woman than in the calling of Mary to be the mother

of the Saviour of the world” Chapter 2 of 1Timothy ends with the best consolation of all. It is not meant simply to cheer women up because they do not get to preach. Rather, it is meant to give hope to us all because God offers salvation from sin in Jesus Christ. If the first part of v.15 does refer to the coming of Christ, then the rest of the verse falls into place. How is salvation received? By faith, of course. Then Paul mentions some of the virtues which always accompany saving faith - love, holiness and propriety (or self-control). These character traits are the proof of genuine faith, and women must continue in these graces to persevere in the faith. “Propriety” or self-control is the perfect word to end this chapter. It describes a woman of prudence and discretion. Back in v.9 it referred to modesty in dress, here in v.15 it suggests self-restraint in seeking authority in the church. As sons and daughters of God let us glorify him by trusting what the Bible says and submitting to his will for the church - the men by stepping forward to assume spiritual leadership when they are called, and the women by encouraging such leadership through willing submission.

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.