

1 Timothy 2:8 - 3:7 Men + Women in Ministry

Over the last 100 years, our culture has seen many of the barriers that once separated men and women broken down. Women now vote, can have bank accounts, have equal access to education, and now occupy pretty much every space once deemed male-only zones: they sit on boards and run companies and have twice become Prime Minister. At the same time discrimination against women has been outlawed, rape in marriage made illegal, and the recent me-too movement has shone a light on sexual harassment. These changes have been long overdue.

As those changes were taking place, a similar movement occurred in the church of England and in other mainline churches, challenging the notion that some roles within the church are for men only. Perhaps that's why in recent decades this passage from 1 Timothy has spawned more ink than almost anything else. It was, and still is, a debate that is often full of passion but sadly devoid of nuance, where scripture is often either entirely ignored or applied far too literally so that our own cultural values end up steering scripture, rather than the other way around.

Given the vast changes in society and the fact that women can now be both priests and bishops in the Church of England, you may well ask if should we worry about it anymore? Shouldn't we just live and let live, whatever our own opinions might be? Well, I don't think we can.

1: Even if this issue isn't a core Christian doctrine, it is still important. We can't just close our minds to the scriptures and refuse to think.

2: The C of E holds that both the traditional *complementarian* position and the new *egalitarian* view are acceptable positions to hold, and it has committed itself to the mutual flourishing of both groups.

3: Churches have been known to err. It is clearly possible for churches and synods to make mistakes, because they have done many times in the past.

That's why we're giving a whole talk to this issue today.

If I'm honest, one talk isn't nearly enough, and so I'm going to have to make a number of assumptions and to draw some lines to focus our thinking. In the weekly briefing letter, I'll suggest some resources to help you think through the issue further, but for now let me set out the basis for our thoughts this morning.

But if we are going to wrestle with this issue, it's vital that we agree on the basis for our discussions, the wrestling ring, if you like- and that has got to be the Bible. However our society makes its decisions, within the church and the life of the Christian, the basis for all our decisions must be the Bible. That's where I'm starting this morning with these 4 assumptions in mind.

1: God is good – so his commands are good.

2: The Bible is God's revealed, true and reliable Word.

3: The Bible, when understood correctly, is internally consistent, so it never contradicts itself.

4: The Bible's teaching- when properly applied - is relevant to all societies, ages and cultures.

If these are the corners of our wrestling ring- here are the ropes lines which will help limit the scope of what I'm going to say. Each one could be a sermon on its own.

1: Both men and women are made equally in God's likeness, with equal value before God, and with equal access to God via the same path of repentance and faith in Jesus, and with the same call to obey, serve and worship God.

2: Whilst equal in value, men and women are different. They are physically different, psychologically different, and according to Genesis 1 and 2, whilst they share the same mission, to fill, subdue and rule over God's creation under his rule, they have slightly different roles to play. Not less important, just different.

3: This isn't about the power and dominance of men and the subjugation of women. For far too long we have equated leadership with dominance and submission with oppression. But Jesus came to serve, and he served willingly and sacrificially; submitting his will to the will of the Father, even to death on the cross. That was the pattern Jesus gave to his disciples. It's a pattern the church has not always lived out, but nevertheless this isn't about power, dominance or subjugation.

4: This isn't about everywhere. Some have taken Paul's words to mean that all women should be subject to all men, in every context. They've taught that women should never lead men in any situation, that they should stay at home, raise a family and silently support and agree with their husbands in everything. Let me be clear. There is no Biblical mandate for that at all.

As far as I can see, there are just 2 places where the Bible speaks about male leadership, and that is in the home and in the church. That's it. Nowhere else. And in even then the role of women should be far more extensive than has often been the case.

If those are the posts and ropes of our wrestling ring, before we begin to grapple with these verses let's take a view across the arena and survey the territory. Every verse has a context in history and that's no different here, and understanding the context of these verses will help us to understand more of what Paul has to say.

But every passage also has a wider context, that of the whole Bible. And when there are passages which are especially challenging, and this is one, we need to make sure our interpretations fit with the teaching of all of scripture. As the 39 articles make clear, no passage of scripture should be interpreted in a way to destroy the teaching in another. This is the consistency of the Bible I spoke of earlier.

The immediate context is one of false teaching entering the church in Ephesus. As with many NT letters there's not enough detail to give us a perfect understanding of the situation, but some things are clear. False teachers had brought false teaching into the church. It had something to do with the improper application of Old Testament genealogies and other passages in the Bible, and the results were discord, doubt and disorder. Established patterns of worship and order were being overturned hence Paul's letter, written so that, chapter 3 verse 15, people will know *"how to conduct themselves in God's household."*

Given that chapter 2 is about what happens when the church meets together, it's also pretty clear that some of the women have started to take on certain roles within the church which Paul says they should not do.

But before our hackles get raised and assume that Paul was a terrible misogynist, let's take a wider view of his ministry, because when we do, we'll see that defining Paul like that simply won't do.

Flick back to Romans 16 and you'll see a long list of people Paul greets as he ends his letter. It starts with Phoebe, a deaconess, who has been a huge blessing and encouragement to Paul. It moves on in verse 3 and 4 to Priscilla and her husband Aquilla, who are Paul's fellow workers. We met them in Acts 18 when together they taught Apollos the truth of the gospel and equipped him in his ministry. Now a church is meeting in their house.

In verse 7 Paul calls Andronicus and Junia, *'outstanding amongst the apostles.'* They weren't apostles in the same sense as the 12 or Paul, but the word also means those who are sent out by the church with the good news of Jesus, perhaps as missionaries.

Verse 12 tells of Tryphosa and Tryphena, women who have worked hard in the Lord, as did Persis. Paul has a long list here of women he has worked with and who are serving the Lord with him. And in doing so, he's following the pattern of Jesus.

Although Jesus' disciples were all men, women frequently accompanied them. These women supported him in practical and financial ways, listened to his teaching- think of Mary sitting at his feet. And they stayed with the disciples after Jesus had ascended to heaven, joining in the prayers as they waited for the Spirit to come. And of course it was women who were the first witnesses of the resurrection.

If time allowed, we could delve deeper into the role of women in the gospels, the New Testament and the Old Testament, because when we do, we find that women had a far greater role than had been the case in Jewish practice. Paul and the early church, like Jesus, was not misogynistic, wanting women in the kitchen or in humble, hidden roles. Women were vital partners in the gospel growth of the early church, as their ministry is to ours.

But does that mean there is now no distinction between the roles of men and women in the church? Not according to Paul. In 1 Timothy 2 vv11 and 12. *"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet."*

Keep in mind the wide view and the local issue. Don't lose sight of them or you'll hear Paul say things he isn't saying.

Keep in mind the rings posts and the ropes. Remember that this is God's Word and this is God's church, and don't take offence or reject it as out of date, or you'll be forced to reject words of great comfort and hope as well.

But listen as Paul sets some very limited boundaries over the role women should play in the life of the local church as it gathers together for teaching and worship.

Firstly there's an attitude Paul wants to stress. *"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission."* Remember Paul is writing to a church which is badly disordered, perhaps where men and women are each wanting their voices heard. Old restraints have been thrown off, perhaps through the false teaching that had crept in, and Paul wants to re-establish proper order.

So as he has done with the issue around inappropriate clothing, Paul has a word of rebuke for the women. Learn in the right way, he says. Some have suggested that Paul is so worried about how a truly egalitarian church would appear to the watching world, that he calls a halt to progressive changes he'd ideally like to see. But notice he says that women should learn. We take that for granted, and we are appalled at the idea that under the Taliban girls will be denied any education, but in the ancient world women were not taught. One Jewish Rabbi wrote that he'd rather see the Torah burnt than taught to women, yet here is Paul saying very clearly that women should be learn the scriptures. And rightly so- if all God's people are to serve him and obey his commands, then we all need to be taught and equipped for service.

But attitude is vital. Quietness isn't silence; it's about not seeking to but in or contradict, or take over as God's Word is taught, but listening, taking it in, and learning well. And submission here is firstly under God's Word- and both men and women should submit to that; and secondly under the leadership of those appointed to the task of teaching and leading the congregation. The church is not a free for all, where all opinions are equally valid, nor where all can lead and teach as they see fit. It's a place where God's Word must be faithfully and rightly taught so that God's people can learn to walk in God's ways and live and work for his glory.

If the clothing some women were wearing was inappropriate within God's people, then so was the attitude some brought with them. Paul calls for women to learn in *quietness and full submission*.

But if verse 11 is the right attitude, in verse 12 Paul draws a line of role and responsibility. *"I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet."*

Once again, let me stress, this isn't about talent or ability- I know many women who are great communicators and Bible scholars, and many who are great leaders. But it seems pretty clear, both here and in chapter 3, that Paul is establishing a limit to what roles a woman should fulfil in the life of the church. And according to the plain reading of scripture, local church leadership, which is the most obvious context here, with its primary calling to teach the faith, is a role for suitable, qualified men alone.

Although this was obviously a live issue in Ephesus, and perhaps in Corinth too, until relatively recently Paul's teaching here was not in question. In fact, both orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, as well as many protestant denominations still hold to this teaching. Perhaps that's unsurprising when we look at Paul's basis for this restriction. Where does he take us? He goes back before the fall to creation.

Paul's argument has 2 parts. Firstly in verse 13 he talks about Adam being formed first. Throughout the OT the first born has certain rights and privileges, and Paul seems to be pointing to that here. He might also be eluding to the fact that Eve was not just formed after him, but from him (God took a rib from Adam and formed Eve from it); and for him- to be his helper in fulfilling the task God gave them both.

But remember that in the OT God is also described as a helper on numerous occasions. So Eve is no skivvy slave, but a strong, dependable, partner with Adam in fulfilling God's mission, one on whom Adam relies. So an order is established in creation, of a husband leading his wife, but it isn't one of ruling over, but leading with and leading for. That's the same pattern we see in Ephesians where wives are told to submit to their husbands as to the LORD, and husbands are told to love their wives with the same servant-hearted, self-sacrificial-love that took Jesus to the cross.

Paul moves then to talk about the fall. This is harder to piece together, because although Eve was deceived by the serpent and sinned first, Adam was with her. Having done nothing to protect her, Adam then took and ate the apple even though he wasn't deceived. His sin then was deliberate and wilful.

Some have used Eve's deception to suggest that women are more naturally deceivable than men, and therefore are not capable of being leaders, but that isn't right. After all, it was the men who refused to believe the resurrection and there have been plenty of men taken in by false teaching too.

I suspect that Paul's point is an allusion to the consequences of God's creation order being reversed. Adam should have led and protected Eve, but he didn't, and as a result of Eve being deceived, Adam himself fell. That's why when God called them out it was Adam who bore the blame. Again, the point reinforces God's pattern for leadership in the family- as in God's family, the church- as one of male-headship by loving, self-sacrificial service and by teaching the truth.

Verse 15, about women being saved through child-birth is even more difficult. Both the Greek and Paul's argument are obscure, but the best interpretation seems, given the context points back to Eve, is that it's alluding to the coming of Jesus. How? Because Eve would bear a child, and his line would eventually lead to the serpent-crushing saviour coming into the world. And through faith in him, with obedience to the truth, all women, like men who believe, can be saved.

The last question then is how does this teaching apply today? And indeed, does it apply today? Some have suggested that Paul's command for women not to lead or

teach in main church gatherings is simply a cultural issue which can be ignored, in the same way as the lifting up of hands in prayer. But the lifting up of hands was based on an unchanging principle of humble, holy prayer, and Paul's argument for these statements in creation does suggest a principle at work here that cannot be so easily dismissed.

As you might imagine, there are many views on this. For me, the Bible is clear that the senior leadership in every local church should be male, and that therefore Bishops should be male. Not because men are better, more talented or more important, but because it reflects God's creation order and because that's what God's Word says. And if you are to convince me otherwise, you'll need to do it from scripture, not from culture or personal experience.

But what about women teaching in church, under the authority of a male church leader? What about having an ordained women as part of a church staff team, serving under a male leader, as many churches do? Is that ok? John Stott argues that the underlying and unchanging principles here are those of submission and male leadership, with silence and not teaching being the cultural expressions. Is he right? I think he is, but I confess this is an issue that I need to keep thinking through.

As Paul continues his letter to Timothy, it's clear that there are lines that need to be drawn on doctrine, on ethics, and on church leadership and order. But as we seek to draw the lines where God draws them, we must make sure that we do not draw extra lines where the Bible is silent. Some churches have excluded women from pretty much any role in public worship, but a quick survey of the New Testament shows women serving in many kinds of ways, praying, prophesying, and singing in public worship; teaching other women, teaching children, acting as evangelists, hosting churches in their homes, giving, assisting, encouraging, discipling future leaders and serving, no doubt, in many other ways besides. And if the God's church is going to grow and flourish, then we need godly women to serve in all these ways, just as we need godly men to step up and obey the call God places on their lives.

Let's not let our discussions on this issue descend into sexism or misogyny, nor our practice become one of domination, servitude and second class disciples. The scripture's description of the partnership between men and women at home and in the church, has been compared to a dance, where the man leads but the two are united in such a graceful, movement that no toes are stepped on, no egos are bruised, and where the unity is one in which both partners flourish and thrive as God

intended. That's what we need to aim for, and that is what humble submission to God's Word brings.

I haven't read and studied so much for a talk for a long time as I have for this one. And my hope is that I'll keep reading and studying so that if I'm wrong, then God's Word will be able to correct my thinking. That should be our commitment shouldn't it. We're to be people of the Word, submitting to scripture, even when it goes against our feelings, opinions or those of our culture.

But as we wrestle with this issue our manner must be right. Remember those men in Ephesus who had anger and resentment in their hearts? That should not be the case with us.

When speaking about this issue, Sarah Mullaly, the Bishop of London, said that we need to remember that this issue is always personal. She's right. And so whatever our point of view, we need to guard our tongues and hearts carefully, and pray for grace and gentleness, that despite any differences of opinion on this issue, the bond of the Spirit which unites us to one another in Christ is strengthened not weakened, that we may all seek to love and serve one another in the service of King Jesus.