

29th March 2020 6 pm. Andrew Attwood on “Women in Ministry” (1 Timothy 2:8-15)

[Revd. Andrew Attwood:]

So, good evening! This is another opportunity for Bible teaching to follow on from what we've done on previous weeks, to deal with a contentious passage from the Bible. A section of Saint John's Church have been looking at Paul's first letter to Timothy, and on this occasion we're going to be looking at 1 Timothy 2 verses 8 to 15, which deals with the issue of women, teaching and authority. So it's all about understanding this complicated passage. So before we begin, let's pray:

Lord Jesus, I want to pray that you would help us now by your Holy Spirit to use our minds, to use our experience, and to be led by your word, to understand what the apostle Paul was meaning in this passage to Timothy. Help us to get a proper grasp of it and to help us engage with it in a positive way in Jesus' name. Amen

So the passage in question is this: Paul says,

⁸ Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing. ⁹ I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵ But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Now to modern ears, such a passage is hard to fully comprehend. Some people may recoil from some of the words in there, but before we react to this text, let's remember, this comes from Scripture, this comes from the authoritative Word of God. So even if there may be confusions or even reactions, I want you to perhaps approach it with some level of humility, perhaps not with presumption, perhaps putting arrogance to one side, and remember this: in your experience of dealing with the Bible even if you've been a Christian for a very short time, you will know that Scripture can become clearer, the more you study, the more you explore it. So I just want you to commit to this period of study prayerfully and with openness to God's revelation to help us understand.

Now just to set the scene, when we look at particular themes or topics that are in the Bible, we need to see how all these themes sit across the whole of the Bible. Does the Bible have one thing to say about this particular topic, or does it have multiple things to say about this particular topic. So for example, if I was going to be doing some kind of study to do with sexuality, particularly to do with say the contentious subject of homosexuality, there's a whole series of passages that refer to it and they all say basically the same thing. So there's a single view from Scripture, whereas, when you find passages in Scripture to do with women's roles and women's ministry, there are multiple things being expressed, some positives, some things that seem to be more controlled or limited. Now given that that's the case, people reading the Bible could emphasize one or another perspective on this and I have to kind of acknowledge that there may be different views on this. I'll be expressing my own view and interpretation today, but it's clear just from listing all the different

passages or even this small selection of passages to do with women's ministry, there's more than one view.

Previously, when I was talking about how to read the Bible, you need to work this through in terms of the overarching narrative of Scripture, so it fits into the big picture, we looked at the idea of continuity and discontinuity, what's the same from the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, what's changed under the New Covenant, comparing passages so you can see what's different or similar in different things that Paul might have said here or Jesus might have said there, what's the immediate context that this writing comes into, and even zooming further in to word studies: what do these words actually mean when you analyse them? That's what we're going to be doing today: we're going to explore in all of those different kinds of ways.

To set the scene, if we zoom right out, we go back to the very beginning of the Bible, and you will remember that at the Fall, when human beings have rebelled against God and are cast out from his presence, there is a curse placed on Adam and on Eve; and on Adam there's a curse that it's going to be hard to eke out a life in a world that is now going to be corrupted by that, it's not going to be quite so fruitful, it's going to be hard, and it also says this in Genesis 3:16:

To the woman he said,

'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labour you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.'

In other words the outcome of rebellion from God is a painful change in terms of how procreation happens, but also a change in how men and women are going to relate to each other. This isn't God sort of like pronouncing it as a kind of His will, He's saying, "This is the outcome of what has happened now because of your rebellion against Me." Husbands will be oppressive to wives, and wives will want their husbands, will long for their husbands, but they will lord it over their wives, and I think history bears that out: there has been an imbalance, an inappropriate way of relating between the different sexes, and women have borne the brunt for most of that.

In contrast to that, when we come to the New Covenant, when we come to the New Testament, we see the emerging of Jesus in his public ministry exercising a different way of relating. When we think of Jesus, His picture of authority, His picture of leadership, we see an entirely different model. He speaks to his disciples and he says, "You know you see how the pagans lord it over you or lord it over their servants, so it should not be with you: you need to serve if you're going to lead, you're going to be the least if you want to be the greatest." And so he models that perfectly with the washing of feet in his last evening with his disciples, so there's something changed, there's a discontinuity now in how Jesus communicates authority and leadership, something has shifted that is different from how things were under the Fall.

That's already going to be a trend set by Jesus, but there are other things that we can see in the gospel accounts that give you a picture specifically with regards to women in the gospels. It needs to be said from the outset that when Jesus selected his immediate cohort of followers, it was twelve men. We can't get around that, that's just simply how it is. That's what Jesus chose: he chose twelve men as principal apostles, principal witnesses. Nevertheless we also see females drawn into a discipling role. Luke 10:38-42 - Mary sits at Christ's feet: that's explicitly a female stepping into a role where she is like a disciple alongside the men.

We see with Mary Magdalene, and this is possibly one of the most significant features, someone who travels with Jesus, there's a number of women who travel around with him and provide for him, but Mary Magdalene is the one chosen by Jesus at His Resurrection to effectively be an apostle to the apostles! The word "apostle" means someone who is sent, and Mary witnesses Jesus and sees Jesus raised from the dead and is told, "Go and tell My brothers." In other words, Jesus chooses a woman to be the herald, the first primary herald of the Resurrection, to men. This is a really important development.

Likewise that reference I made earlier to Luke 8:1-3 where it talks about a band of women who did actually travel with the twelve and Jesus, and a number of these were wealthy women who funded the ministry of Jesus, you'll find that in Luke 8:1-3. So there is prominence of women in the formative ministry of Jesus Christ, even though he chose twelve men as his principal witnesses. And one of the key witnesses of his Resurrection before everybody else is Mary Magdalene, a woman.

If you were to look further on, you would find in Acts and in Romans references to females in ministry. You find in Acts 18 verses 18 to 26 a little snapshot of something that is going on, because Apollos, a fairly new convert, has been wandering around preaching (he's been, you know, converted to follow Jesus Christ), but Priscilla and Aquila, who were people who came to Christ because of Paul, they recognized that his understanding is slightly out of line in one or two areas and it says this from 18:26:

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

It's really important to notice that in this account, when Luke is writing it down, he says *Priscilla* and Aquila, Priscilla being the woman, Aquila being the husband: he swapped their names round from the first time he mentions them earlier on in Acts and he's giving prominence to Priscilla in this, with Aquila, teaching a *preacher* better theology. This is a woman taking a man aside who already has a teaching ministry and saying, "Can I guide you into something clearer and better?" This is a clear biblical example of a woman giving teaching to a man who is already a teacher.

Then we come to this interesting section in Romans. If you think about it, Romans is the pre-eminent piece of theology from the apostle Paul. We have his Gospel mandate spelled out most clearly in the book of Romans. And yet in this very letter, at the very end of chapter 16, you have this set of greetings given where Paul is effectively commending a whole series of people, so that when he arrives or when they arrive or met, they know they have apostolic approval. He mentions Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus's mother, Julia, Nereus's sister. These are all named people by Paul saying, "I commend them to you." Let's have a look at Phoebe for a moment. Most scholars would recognize that Phoebe, being listed first, according to how letters were usually written in those days, is probably the one carrying the letter to the Romans. In other words Paul writes it from where he is, he gives it to Phoebe, and Phoebe travels to the Roman community, and she would be the one who opens the letter and reads it to the congregation there. So this is a woman announcing Romans to a gathered mixed church community. All the other females here are commended for their ministry, their ministry often alongside Paul, so he works with and often recognizes particular qualities in these female ministries. I also want to emphasize Junia. Junia is the one who is mentioned here too: Romans 16 verse 7. It says this:

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

This is fairly remarkable stuff. These are two Christians who have been in prison with Paul, so they've suffered for their faith to the point of losing their liberty, and he says they are outstanding among the apostles. Now this is apostles with a lower case 'a': it's not like the twelve who are the principal witnesses. This is apostolic in function: these are church planters, these are innovators of new activity of God, but it says that Andronicus and Junia, a female, are apostles. There have been various attempts down the ages of trying to make this word Junia possibly masculine, so it doesn't sound like it's a female are possible, but the Greek is clear: Junia is female and she's called by the apostle Paul to be a functional apostle. Now all of these references give you strong evidence that in the big sweep of the New Testament under the New Covenant something has changed, that means women are in a position of ministry, significant ministry when you think of that. Nevertheless it does need to be said that Jesus chose men as his primary witnesses. That's the case for the writing of the New Testament as well: the whole of the New Testament is written by males. I can't give you a clear explanation for that, I'm simply stating it as it is. What I do know is that their word is authoritative and we do know that Jesus chose the twelve specifically to be with him and to be sent by him to be his witnesses, so there's something discrete about that as a ministry that he gave to them.

But it's also worth setting in context how the Bible actually describes the twelve as people. If you were to look at Mark's gospel as a whole, you would find that the reputation and the character and the behaviour of the disciples, including the twelve here, is not so shiny. Mark's gospel was probably heavily influenced by Peter and all of Peter's frailties and the frailties of the twelve are written into Mark's account. They're full of doubts, questions, confusions, misunderstandings, bad behaviour, lack of faith, even after the Resurrection, so there's nothing shiny about these guys simply because they're men. They're portrayed warts and all. Even if Jesus chooses them as His principal witnesses, it's not like He's saying, "They're really great," He's simply saying, "They're my witnesses," so in that sense we have both men and women endorsed by Jesus and by Paul in terms of ministry, in terms of being disciples, in terms of being heralds of the Good News of God. So that's the bigger picture that the New Testament gives us.

Now let's zoom in and look at the context of this passage written to Timothy. It's written to Timothy while he is in Ephesus. And I'm just going to read to you a quote¹ here, that describes something of the religious cultic life that was happening in Ephesus:

In terms of cultic life in Ephesus, it is clear that women played a significant role and held important offices in many cults. [...] Cultic activity for women was more prominent in Asia Minor than elsewhere. Kearsley notes that the fifteen women who were [*archieieiai*] ("chief priests" or "high priests") in Ephesus is the largest group known from any city. At least some held the title in their own right and were not dependent on the title of their husbands.

[...]

[²] There are many indications that the new Roman woman with new social freedoms and powers was making her influence felt among the wealthier Ephesian women.

You'll see the picture there on that slide of Artemis, Artemis was a great big temple in Ephesus, a female goddess. She's kind of arrayed with signs of fertility about her. It was a place all to do with sexuality and sex, and it

1 Rick Strelan, in his book *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus*, quoted by Marg Mowczko in <https://margmowczko.com/the-prominence-of-women-in-the-cultic-life-of-ephesus/>

2 Marg Mowczko herself, in the same article

heralded and lifted up women. So there's something to do with Ephesus and females and faith and religion that needs to be paid attention. It's also worth mentioning that when Paul is writing, he seems to be addressing influential women who don't necessarily have enough Christian knowledge. He says this³:

⁹ I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

Let's just have a think about that: how many people in ancient times would have elaborate hairstyles, gold, pearls, expensive clothes? They had to be people of wealth. They could have been significant Roman women: high culture, high status. They could have been wealthy because they were connected to the Artemis temple and they had a high level of income coming from that. So there's something about their status that needs to be attended to here. Paul is talking about people who shouldn't be using status and wealth to make things happen. We know that in our modern context, we know that people can lean and make things happen, because they're going to have more power than people who have less wealth. So there's something about that, that makes a bit more sense of Paul going on to say,

¹¹ A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

Maybe Paul is saying something explicitly to do with this context, rather than giving a universal command.

Now there's a particular word that's in this Greek line to do with the word "authority". It's only used once in the whole of the New Testament and it's a very rare word. It's not used hardly at all in ancient language, and it's not the usual word for authority that's used elsewhere, say for example in the gospels. When Jesus is described as having authority, the word ἐξουσία (exousia) is used, and that's a kind of right authority, a good authority, like a policeman having authority to stop the traffic when he puts his hand up, a good right, appropriate authority. But this particular word αὐθεντεῖν (authentein) is the word of false authority: it's closer to the word "to dominate". It could be translated in a different way: "I do not permit a woman to *dominate* over a man; she must be quiet." It may be that we are misinterpreting what Paul is saying. It is entirely possible that people of high status with strong influence were actually dominating because of that status other people, other people who were listening as a result.

So what kind of conclusions can we begin to draw from this diving into the text? It's clear that Paul has a very high level of concern about what kind of people teach. And he would say, in a general sense, the need to restrict anyone, male or female, who is still perhaps influenced by status, cultural or religious trends, that they're not ready to speak into a local church context until they have been taught properly, until they have shown some level, some evidence of maturity. And likewise people of wealth need correction on how they influence others. This parallels with what is said in the letter to James, where he's pretty condemning of people who are rich, and says that they need to kind of recalibrate how they approach things, and he raises up those people who are poor, because they have a more likely access to the Kingdom of God because they don't lean on wealth, so there's something about correction to do with local behaviour, because perhaps these females were wealthy and were dominating in their particular context. Despite that local context, I think it is still fair to say, that the wider counsel of Scripture endorses women in ministry generally. It includes the opportunity to influence and teach, because that's what Priscilla did, alongside her husband, when correcting and guiding Apollos,

even though we take into account that the written apostolic witness was male.

Now, some people may say, "Well, that sounds all well and good, Andrew, but what about verses 13 to 14 in this 1 Timothy passage?" It says this:

¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

This sounds like Paul is appealing to some knock-down quote from the Old Testament that is making this a universal command. But is it? Is that what is happening? He's pointing back to the story of Adam and Eve and he's saying that Eve was deceived. Now let's go back for a moment to Genesis 2 verses 15 to 18. this is what it actually says there:

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man [that 's Adam] and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'

¹⁸ The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'

This is the passage to which Paul is referring. If you look at the order in which this passage reads, to whom does God give commandments? It's to the man: he gives him instruction about what he should and should not do. In other words the man is the one who is taught. It's only later, when Eve comes along, that she appears on the scene and then she's deceived by the serpent. Why was she deceived? Where was the teaching? She she hadn't been spoken to like God had spoken to Adam. She hadn't heard what Adam had heard. And to some extent this is Adam's fault! Adam's responsibility was to guide Eve as she arrived after him and to give information to say, "This is what the Lord God says we should and should not do." And so perhaps it's more culpability on Adam for not giving her the instruction that she needs. That would make perfect sense, then, of Paul using this passage in the context of an Ephesian church: he's basically saying just like Eve was deceived because she didn't have appropriate teaching, I want the women to be quiet until they're taught properly, until they do understand. So again it may be a temporary context, where Paul is saying, "Get those people taught properly so that then they can be free from the cultural hang-ups and the religious patterns and the habits of using wealth or influence and then they'll be in a better place to minister."

So I hope that gives some kind of explanation with regards to Paul's reference back to Genesis. I would say then, in conclusion, that even though there are some tricky parts to this, there are different bits of Scripture that seem to say one thing or another, the general tone of the Bible is endorsing a liberty of ministry. We know in terms of identity that the Bible says, "There is neither Greek nor Jew, neither male nor female in Christ Jesus."⁴ In other words, our gender is not significant really at all in terms of our identity, and it appears from the practice of Jesus and the ministry of Paul and his associates that the ministry of women is absolutely endorsed and encouraged by the apostle.

I would say that therefore we need to take a leaf from Jesus' book and from Paul's book. We need to see if we can not just follow what culture says about society, but take the lead and say we need to release everybody into their gifting, into their calling, including teaching. I think we're at a place now where there is much more involvement and much more liberty for females in church ministry, but we should always make sure that that is something that we're endorsing and there's no cultural bias going on either leaning one way or

another.

I'm going to finish there. I would encourage you to talk about this particular passage, perhaps in your groups if you're still meeting online, and explore it, kick it around, see if you can see things from any different perspective or find a similar perspective to myself. But I would encourage you to start from the bigger picture and then zoom in to what Paul might be saying in this contentious passage.

Let me just finish there with a prayer:

Lord Jesus, I want to thank you for your Word, and even though it may challenge us and concern us at times, I pray that you would help us to understand it better, and I pray that you would help us to apply it even 2,000 years later. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

So I commend this teaching to you. Do feel free to comment or ask questions or get back to me if you have any other thoughts God bless you.

Revd. Andrew Attwood

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