

## Women In Ministry

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In the light of the ongoing debate among evangelicals about women in ministry, especially in relation to preaching, and the general erosion of denominational boundaries, we thought it necessary to put together a brief position paper on where we at Gynea Baptist Church stand on this issue outlining our reasons based on the key text of 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

This is not an easy issue to address and the theological and exegetical concerns are complex to say the least. This complexity means that it is possible for equally committed, godly, and scholarly evangelical Christians to fall into both camps (Beck & Blomberg 2001, 12).

By way of introduction, it is important to note that this has not been an issue at Gynea Baptist Church. The practice of the church has, for a long time, been to allow women to minister in all capacities, including preaching.

There are, broadly speaking, two positions on this issue. First, a complementarian position which argues that while men and women are created equal in the image of God there are, nonetheless, God-ordained, complementary roles for men and women. The most frequently cited roles are male headship of the family and the prohibitions in 1 Timothy against women teaching or exercising authority over men. It is important to note that what is not debated is the equality of men and women; only the roles they ought to hold.

The second position, which is that held by the leadership of Gynea Baptist Church, is the egalitarian. Egalitarians argue that men and women are created equal in the image of God and that there are no roles in the church that women are restricted from holding.

The central text that is found in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 which reads,

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. 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. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (TNIV)

In this paper an egalitarian reading of this text will be briefly argued. At the conclusion of the paper some additional resources for further study will be recommended.

To begin with, it should be stated that if this were the only passage we had dealing with women and ministry we would be hard pressed to escape the implication that women should not teach or exercise authority. This seems to be Paul's meaning here. However, it must also be admitted that if this were our only text dealing with the issue that it would still not be an easy text. There are several aspects of this passage that complicate our discussion.

For instance, is Paul referring to women or wives in verse 11? The Greek term can refer to either and the context determines the usage. Given the similarity of this passage to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 which is clearly related to husbands and wives (and to which we will turn in a moment) and the reference to childbearing it seems plausible that Paul means wives more specifically than women.

Second, the term 'have authority' is a unique term in the New Testament and is not the usual word for 'authority'. The word has a sense of domineering about it which also changes the overall sense of the passage. We also have to work out exactly what situation Paul is referring to. Does he forbid a woman/wife to exercise authority generally or just in the context of worship? It is also worth noting that Paul states that he does not permit (or allow) a woman to teach or have authority which is somewhat more open than forbidding or commanding. Could it be that Paul might, in certain circumstances, allow women to teach?

A third issue in this passage is the reference to Adam and Eve. Paul refers to the creation order in 1 Corinthians 11 in a similar circumstance and the question is whether he is using the creation narratives in a foundational sense (to explain why things are the way they are) or in an illustrative sense. We will look at this a bit later on.

Finally, what does it mean that women will be saved through childbearing? This surely relates specifically to wives and not women generally!? And even if it relates to wives why does Paul use the same word here that he uses for salvation?

These are just some of the issues that have been raised by this passage and which we will attempt to give some answers to in this paper. So, you can see that this is not as simple as it may sometimes be thought. This complexity also indicates how equally committed, Bible-believing Christians can end up on opposite sides of the debate.

I stated above that if this were the only passage we had in the New Testament that dealt with this issue it would, even in the face of the complexity of the text, be difficult to escape the implication that Paul is limiting women's roles in ministry. This is not, however, the only passage we have and it is to a brief discussion of those passages that we now turn.

A good principle of biblical interpretation is that the context should determine the meaning. The immediate context of 1 Timothy 2, as indicated by the heading in the TNIV, is "Instructions on Worship". 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 bears significant similarities with our text and proves very instructive. The text reads,

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (TNIV)

Notice that in this context it is clearly related to husbands and wives. Notice also that this passage is part of a much larger discussion on worship that Paul begins in 1 Corinthians 11. The first issue Paul deals with there is women who were praying and prophesying without a head covering. This suggests that the command to silence in 14:34 is not a total ban since women were permitted to pray and prophesy. The silence in 14:34 appears to have been related to the timeliness of the speech more than anything else. In 11:2-16 Paul engages in a lengthy argument on why women should have their heads covered. He argues that long hair is their glory, he refers to the created order, and makes reference to the natural order of things.

Now, most evangelical churches, complementarian or egalitarian, have rightly set aside head coverings for women in church and likewise, do not demand long hair styles for women and short back and sides for men. The reason is that this passage clearly reflects a cultural practice that is no longer valid for us. We cannot, however, just ignore the text. We have to ask ourselves if there is a principle that Paul based these teachings on that is cross-cultural?

It appears that Paul's primary concern in 1 Corinthians (and elsewhere) is that the gospel not be brought into disrepute. To throw off social conventions, such as head coverings in first century Corinth, risks the reputation of the gospel and the life that it brings. I would argue that this same principle lies behind the household codes of the New Testament (Ephesians 5:21-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1) where Paul seems to advocate for patriarchy (and slavery!). The patriarchy that Paul advocates is distinctly Christian and is based on mutual submission of husbands and wives. It was important, in the early Christian period, that the gospel, scandalous as it was, not scandalise for the wrong reasons. The gospel was liberating and the women of Corinth in particular, had grabbed that freedom and run with it, to the point of bringing the gospel into disrepute.

One of the strongest arguments for this principle is that Paul refers to women throwing off their head coverings (or men having long hair) or speaking in church as disgraceful not immoral. These things do not make it into any of the vice lists of the New Testament but are 'only' disgraceful. Paul desires the Christian community to be in the world but not of it – upholding social conventions and values that fall in line with biblical teaching. This includes the conventional family unit. For women (or men or slaves) to flaunt these would risk the reputation of the gospel.

If we return to 1 Timothy we see that this forms a plausible explanation for some of Paul's comments. First of all, in the context of public worship he calls for modesty in dress for the women. This isn't just for those involved in 'platform' ministry, but for all the women in the church. Second, the submissive and quiet learning may also reflect social convention. Some scholars point out that women in antiquity would have had less access to education which may have influenced Paul's prohibition here. Third, the reference to childbearing seems to

uphold the social conventions and family values. This would mean that women are not 'saved' by childbearing but show the evidence of their salvation through upholding those social conventions that do not bring the gospel into disrepute.

If this is indeed the case and Paul's concern is the reputation of the gospel is it not possible that we are bringing the gospel into disrepute by restricting women's roles? Today women have equal educational and occupational opportunities and women hold key positions in all levels of our society. There are very few voices that would argue that women should not hold these positions or that they are not worthy of respect in these roles. And yet, in the church we still restrict their roles in ways that are socially unacceptable and at times arbitrary. We must, of course, be careful that we do not simply allow our society's values to become our own and it must be admitted that the church has not always been particularly discerning in its task. However, I would argue that we are under much greater danger from imbibing our culture's values on money and affluence (which is a moral issue in the Bible) than from our view on women's roles in ministry.

The parallel passages in 1 Corinthians are not the only passages we have on women and ministry in the New Testament. In fact, the wider context of the New Testament (and the Old Testament – figures such as Deborah and Miriam spring to mind) suggests that women were involved in all forms of ministry; even teaching.

For instance, the first witnesses to the resurrection were women even though their validity in Judaism was not accepted. There is an interesting list of women who followed Jesus, apparently as disciples, in particular Mary who sits and learns at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:38-42). Acts 21:9 informs us that Philip had four daughters who prophesied. It must be remembered that prophets, male and female, spoke with authority into the early Christian community. We have already seen that women functioned this way in Corinth. In the closing chapter of Romans Paul makes reference to several women who held leadership roles of some sort. Phoebe is described as a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (16:1-2), Priscilla is called Paul's co-worker in 16:3. This is a loaded gospel term for Paul that he uses to describe those who have been engaged with him in the work of the gospel – proclamation and teaching. Syntyche and Euodia are also described this way in Philippians 4:2-3). Priscilla is also mentioned in connection with Apollos whom she (and her husband) taught (Acts 18:24-26). Back to Romans 16 we are told that Junia is outstanding among the apostles who were those charged with proclamation (16:7). Furthermore, gender does not appear to be a factor in any of the gift lists of the New Testament especially in relation to teaching (Romans 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 4:11). In fact, in Colossians 3:16 Paul seems to assume that men and women will be engaged in the work of teaching and admonishing one another.

If we look at the qualities of teachers in the New Testament we see again that gender is not a concern. Neither are race or socio-economic status (Galatians 3:28). Incidentally, race could have easily been a factor given that it was race issues between Jews and Gentiles that formed one of the first controversies in the early church and due to the very practical reality that Gentiles would be less familiar with the Old Testament than Jews. Yet, this is never raised apart from Paul's wise advice that new converts not be thrust into those positions (1 Timothy 3:6). What is more important is faithfulness to sound doctrine.

Character is also important but interestingly, one of the most important characteristics is that teachers not be greedy (1 Timothy 3:3; 6:3-5; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:5; 1 Peter 5:2; 2 Peter 2:3, 14).

If I might return to the present, I wonder if our restriction of women's roles, based primarily on gender and not character or sound doctrine isn't a pseudo-donatism. Donatism was a 4<sup>th</sup> century heresy that linked the effectiveness of the sacraments with the worth of the officiating priest. This was a key theological concern of the heresy which began in the context of admitting people to the church who had fallen away and who had the authority to make such a judgment. The link between the worth of the priest and the effectiveness of the sacrament was seen to be a terrible danger. For instance, if one's baptism depends on the worth of the one who does the baptising we would forever be re-baptising people in fear that their baptism was invalid. The orthodox position was that the sacrament was effective apart from the worth of the minister.

If a woman with godly character teaches sound doctrine but is considered invalid because of gender it seems a small step to the Donatism of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The gospel is powerful to save apart from the gender of the one proclaiming it and the Word of God is powerful because it is God's Word not because of the preacher. We must be careful, in our attempt to obey the Bible, that we do not overstep the boundaries of good theology.

Returning to the wider context of the New Testament we appear to be left with two possibilities in relation to 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Either women were normally prohibited from teaching and the other New Testament references are exceptions or women were normally allowed to teach and hold positions of authority and 1 Timothy 2 is an exception. The difficulty with the former is that there is nothing in the texts that suggest an exceptional circumstance. Paul refers to Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia in matter-of-fact language with no explanation. The question becomes whether there is anything in the context of 1 Timothy that suggests an exceptional circumstance?

A careful reading of 1 Timothy reveals two things. First, that Paul is concerned that Timothy confront false teachers in Ephesus (1:3-7; 4:1-3; 6:3-5). False teaching, with all its devastating effects, is clearly a major concern for the apostle. He describes the false teaching as related to 'controversial speculations' and 'myths and endless genealogies', 'forbidding people to marry' and 'controversies and quarrels'. Second, there is an interesting section on young widows in 5:13-15. Paul begins by stating that young widows can become idle busybodies who talk nonsense. This seems fairly innocuous at this point. Paul's solution is to counsel young widows to remarry, have children and manage their households – standard social convention – so that the enemy is given no opportunity for slander. This is interesting in light of the principle we examined earlier about bringing the gospel into disrepute. Paul then concludes by saying that "Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan." (5:15) This takes the situation out of the relatively harmless gossip of young widows and into the disastrous consequences of the false teachers. The nonsense of young widows (perhaps influenced by false teachers not to marry) sound suspiciously like the speculations and controversies of the false teachers. Is it possible that the false teachers were targeting women, especially widows, who, with a lack of education were easy prey? While this cannot be proven it seems plausible and may, therefore, explain why Paul does not permit a woman/wife to teach or exercise authority.

Given this plausible reconstruction of 1 Timothy what can we say about the reference to Eve; the order of her creation and the priority of her deception? Is Paul using this in a foundational way or an illustrative one?

First of all, the creation texts are not primarily about gender roles. In Genesis 1:26-28 God created humanity, male and female, in his image and gave them the same directives - "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (TNIV) In Genesis 2 the woman is created as a 'helper' suitable for the man. The word 'helper' is used in other contexts to describe God and is not used in a subordinate way here. Furthermore, there is nothing about headship or authority (let alone teaching) found in these texts. They are read back into it from the New Testament.

Having said that, in the temptation scene the created order is reversed - serpent, woman, man - and this is intentional and is an important part of the narrative and the consequences of the fall which are described as broken relationships between creation, men and women. However, Eve is guilty of disobeying the prohibition of God, not of overstepping Adam's authority (he was present at the temptation). Nor is Adam criticized for not correcting her or allowing her to override his headship. Paul appears to be using the created order to support traditional family values (as we have already seen).

Second, there is absolutely no biblical basis to suggest that women are more easily deceived than men. If women were more easily deceived why in the world would they be allowed to teach at all! Especially other easily deceived women and impressionable children! This is where the general lack of education among women in antiquity may have played a role. If women, were inherently more easily deceived, you'd think that Paul would have affirmed this throughout the New Testament and that this would have also appeared in the Old Testament. Eve was not more easily deceived, she was the first deceived.

For these reasons I think it is better to understand Paul's reference to Eve's deception as an illustration. It is an example of a time where a woman was deceived with disastrous consequences! There is a 'similar' danger in Ephesus. If the women, who may have been more prone to deception due to lack of education, begin to teach they may lead many astray!

It seems justified in the wider context of the Bible that women can and should teach and lead the church, even men. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 (which is still a difficult passage) is addressing a specific, somewhat exceptional circumstance in Ephesus. It is somewhat exceptional in that Paul seems to be addressing something similar in Corinth. His primary concern is the reputation of the gospel and sound teaching. Our concern should be the same.

In conclusion allow me to say two things. First of all, this is not an issue of salvation but does concern the gospel. What I mean by this is that our salvation is not tied up with our position on this issue. Women's roles in ministry is not one of the essential doctrines of Christian faith and should not be made into one. At the same time, it is an issue of the gospel. The good news is described as liberty for the oppressed, sight for the blind, and freedom for the captive (Luke 4:18-19). This includes freedom from sin and its consequences but also has important implications for our society. Women's roles in ministry is, I believe, an issue of the gospel and of freedom; freedom to be who God has created them to be and I believe that this includes the call to teaching and leadership.

Many women, inside and outside the church, see the gospel as restrictive rather than liberating. Others, who feel the call of God on their lives, struggle with guilt and uncertainty about whether or not they are doing the will of God. These pastoral concerns are significant and need to be addressed.

Because this is a gospel issue it is worth debating, but at the end of the day those who disagree are still our brothers and sisters in Christ and I hope that we would be able to respect, honour and love them as Christ has commanded.

Finally, however, I believe that we should be far more concerned with the content of the message than with the gender of the messenger. To enter a church, see that a man is preaching and automatically accept all that is said is no better than entering a church, seeing a woman take the pulpit and refusing to listen to what she is saying. We are called to be discerning about the truth and to not harden our hearts to what God is saying to us. I am often suspicious that many Christians would not be able to identify heresy if they heard it. Let us seek to become more discerning in our listening to whoever God calls to speak.

This paper does not deal with all the issues related to women in ministry but seeks to outline the position of the leadership of Gympsea Baptist Church and explain this position from the biblical texts which we, along with all evangelicals, believe is formative in our faith and practice. If you would like to explore this issue in greater detail here is a list of useful books that you might want to start with.

James R. Beck, Craig L. Blomberg (eds), 2001, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, CounterPoints Series, Zondervan.

Witherington, Ben III, 1990, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.