

1 Timothy 2

What does it teach?

A Paper by John Woodhouse

Presented at the Priscilla & Aquila Centre Conference

6 February 2012

My purpose in this two-part presentation is to consider as carefully, as we can manage what 1 Timothy 2 – in particular verses 11-15 – teaches.

What better way to begin than hearing the text itself:

¹ Therefore I urge, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, in order that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, in all godliness and reverence. ³ This is good and pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come into a knowledge of truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, a man, Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself, a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time. ⁷ For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of nations in faith and truth.

⁸ Therefore I desire that the men pray in every place, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹ likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, ¹⁰ but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in quietness, in all submission. ¹² And I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through the childbirth — if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

INTRODUCTION: Why is it difficult?

To state the obvious: there are probably few passages of the Bible that strike our ears today with more dissonance than the last few verses of 1 Timothy 2. Of course there are *many* passages in the Bible that strike a discordant note in with their hearers. That has always been the case.

But many of us feel that the last few verses of 1 Timothy 2 have another dimension of difficulty for us – another kind of difficulty. The first thing I would like to reflect on is, Why?

It was not a very long time ago – I say this because I believe I can remember the time! – and indeed through most of the history of Christianity – the passage before us (verses 11-15 of 1 Timothy 2) was not a scandal – at least nothing like it is today. Why is that?

There are those who would have us believe that this is because in previous ages women were regarded as inferior beings to men. Today, thankfully, we know better. We have learnt the

truth of the full equality of men and women. That is what makes 1 Timothy 2 sound so outrageous to our ears today – although not to earlier hearers. In other words, if 1 Timothy 2 did not trouble people – and especially Christian believers – in a former day, as it troubles us today, that is because we have come to a better place today in our understanding of women and men.

I believe that is one of those distortions of the past that comes from a breathtaking arrogance that so exaggerates the goodness of the present, overlooking its problems, and then overstates the failures of the past and ignores past wisdom. It is the equal and opposite error of the nostalgia that sees some past era as a golden age when all was good, and the present as all decline. It is the myth of “progress” – that new is good and old is less good.

There *are* differences between what is believed today about men and women, and what was believed historically. Of course there are. And, yes, that has a lot to do with the fact that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is more jarring than it used to be. But this is more subtle than an imagined relatively recent discovery that women and men share fully in the dignity, value and wonder of being human – in Biblical terms being made in the image of God and being renewed through Jesus Christ in knowledge after the image of our creator (Col 3:10). It is a re-writing of history to suggest that this wonderful truth was not profoundly appreciated by our forebears who were nonetheless more comfortable with 1 Timothy 2 than we are. Indeed it is fair to say that cultures and societies that have historically been influenced by the Biblical gospel have – from the beginning – cared radically about the honouring and valuing and dignity of women.

My suggestion for your consideration is this. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is awkward for us because it does not fit with our views of *individual freedom*. *That's* our problem.

In the so-called Western world we have relentlessly pursued the ideal of freedom – freedom for the individual to be and do whatever we desire – with the one restriction that we do not inhibit or compromise the freedom of other individuals. We have come to think of what it means to be human predominantly in these individual terms. “Human rights” is largely about the rights of individuals. Human value is seen in terms of the individual. And human happiness is sought in individual freedom.

Who could deny that much of this has been good? There are evils that have been overcome in the name of freedom – the freedom of the individual. But this value has been so elevated that it has suppressed other aspects of what it means to be human. And the result is a distortion. There are other societies and cultures that emphasise a more communal understanding of human nature. My identity is understood in relational, rather than individual, terms. I am the son of my father and mother, the father of my children, the husband of my wife – and so on. I am a member of my community. That is who I am – that is how I see myself. All of these relationships bring limitations to my “freedom” as an individual. But that is not a problem to be overcome, it is what being human *is*.

Now I am not suggesting that a communal understanding of humanity is superior to an individualistic understanding. As we see them expressed in various cultures, I suspect that we can see good and evil in both. In societies that emphasize the communal, what matters is freedom of the *community* from outside oppression. We have seen this lead to the acceptance of tyrannical rulers, who trample on individuals, but purport to protect the nation (think of Syria). In the West, where we are individuals, the great experiment of capitalism emerged and may well be in the process of self-destruction because individual freedom given full reign destroys community. It's called greed.

I have wandered somewhat from 1 Timothy 2!

My purpose in this excursus is to suggest that the cultural clash most of us feel as we read this portion of God's Word may be more important than we often suppose. Could it be that the Bible has a better vision of what it means to be human than individual freedom destroying community (as in the West) *or* community destroying individual freedom (as, say, in some middle eastern nations)? And is it possible that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is part of *that* vision, rather than a relic of a supposed terrible age that denigrated women.

I am hopeful that our study of the text together, at least open to this possibility, may help us to appreciate this portion of God's good Word.

1. CONTEXT: "Therefore ... Therefore ..."

One of the very first principles of reading the Bible is that the context must be allowed to illuminate the particular passage before us.

• **Situational context?**

With this passage there has been no shortage of attempts to allow the context to do its work. However most of this effort has been directed to illuminating the passage from what I will call the *situational context*. What was going on in Ephesus? What were the problems? What, precisely, was the problem with the behaviour of women that Paul was here addressing. Timothy knew. The members of the Ephesian church knew. But we do not have the same direct knowledge.

We do know that there was some teaching going on in Ephesus that Paul wanted stopped (see 1:3). It was not healthy. It was not according to the glorious gospel. But we know very little about the specifics.

Some have suggested that women in particular were being taken in by the different teaching – hence Paul's words not allowing them to teach. Others have suggested that there was a kind of first century feminist movement in Ephesus, overthrowing acceptable social norms, and, when it was allowed expression in the church, it brought discredit on the gospel. Hence Paul insisted on behaviour that would not give offence. But, while some bits of evidence can be taken to suggest things like this, on the one hand these reconstructions of the situation

remain largely hypothetical and imaginative (and actually unlikely) while, on the other hand, it seems to me that they do not really explain what Paul actually says.

It is important to understand that when we say that *context* is fundamental for rightly understanding any passage in the Bible, we do not mean a reconstruction of the *situational* context. We know very little indeed about the situational context for most of the books of the Bible. Of course there *was* an historical situation in which each Bible book was written. Sometimes we are told a little about it. Sometimes we can put together some of the details. And, yes, that can be worth doing. But as a principle for reading the Bible, the context that matters most is the *literary* context. Of course these are not mutually exclusive. I am just saying that the Bible reader should give priority to the ways in which the place of a given passage in the document before us, as well as its place in the canon of Scripture, casts light on its meaning and significance.

- **Literary context**

Let's, then, notice some aspects of the context *in this sense* of 1 Timothy 2 and verses 11-15 in particular.

"Therefore ... Therefore ..."

The first point that strikes me are the "Therefore"s that stand at the beginning of verses 1 and 8. I take it that these "Therefore"s signal the logical connection of the two halves of 1 Timothy 2 to what has preceded in 1 Timothy 1. Put briefly, 1 Timothy 1 has presented the problem of certain persons in Ephesus whose teaching was different from the sound and healthy teaching that accords with the glorious gospel of the blessed God that had been entrusted to Paul (see especially 1:3, 10, 11). This different teaching was making a shipwreck of genuine faith (1:19).

It is not easy to piece together what this teaching was in detail, but it seems to have two features:

- (1) It emphasised law at the expense of grace (1:7), and
- (2) It did not lead to the kind of godliness described in 1:5: love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a genuine faith.

Paul's letter is therefore a call to Timothy and the believers in Ephesus:

- (1) to know and teach the gospel of God's grace – his mercy (see 1:13-16), and
- (2) to lives of godliness lived in the light of God's grace (see 3:16; 4:7, 8, 16; 6:3, 6, 11, and much else).

Now: this makes sense of the "Therefore"s.

2:1 “*Therefore* I urge, first of all, that prayers be made for all people.” That is what you do – first of all – when you know God’s grace – when you know that God our Saviour desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (2:4) – you *pray for all people*. This will be the first sign that the different teaching is not taking hold. This will be the basic response to the glorious gospel. “*Therefore* I urge, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.”

Verse 8 then introduces the second “*Therefore*,” and a paragraph that is likewise connected to chapter 1. The glorious gospel calls for practical godliness in the lives of the men and women who pray for all people. “*Therefore* I desire that the men pray in every place, lifting *holy* hands – without anger or quarrelling.” And likewise (verse 9) women must adorn themselves in a manner that is (verse 10) “proper for women who profess *godliness*.” (At the beginning of our second session Jane Tooher is going to reflect with us on the subject raised in verses 9 and 10.)

“in every place”

One further small, but important point, before we get to the details of verses 11-15. There are a number of indications that Paul’s words here have a wide application. The paragraph before us has this phrase near the beginning: “in every place” (2:8). It is an echo of the refrain that ran through the preceding paragraph: “all people.” Wherever people know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, I expect prayers to be made for all people. The Old Testament prophet Malachi spoke of a day when God’s name would be honoured “in every place” (Mal 1:11). As God’s grace is known, and prayers are therefore made “in every place” for all people, Malachi’s words are fulfilled. What Paul desires to happen in Ephesus, he desires to happen “in every place.”

2. VERSES 11-15

I hope that we are now sufficiently oriented to turn our attention in more detail to the half paragraph, verses 11-15. Of course nothing I have said about the context should be allowed to twist the words before us to say something they do not say. But if they fit well with the context as we have seen it, then that is a reasonable argument that we are on the right track.

Verses 11-15 continue the subject of women’s behaviour – what is proper for women who profess godliness (2:10). How should women who profess godliness relate to the sound teaching, of which the apostle has been appointed an apostle and teacher of the nations (2:7)?

He says 4 things: (1) that a woman should learn in a particular way (verse 11); (2) that she should not teach in a particular way (verse 12); (3) that there are very fundamental reasons for this (verses 13, 14); (4) but there is an important qualification (verse 15).

The rest of our time will be given to looking these five verses carefully.

Verse 11: Let a woman learn in quietness, in all submission.

Verse 11 begins: “Let a woman learn.”

- **“Let”**

The idea is not that someone may have been standing in the way of a woman learning, and Paul says to such a person, “Allow a woman to learn.” No. The sense is simply, a woman *should* learn. Although there were circles in which women were not expected to learn in the first century, Paul’s emphasis here is not on women being allowed to do something that they were not normally allowed to do. There is ample evidence through the New Testament that the gospel of Jesus Christ called men and women into a rich fellowship of learning Christ together, but it is not evident that women learning was something radical or controversial. Men and women served Christ together, and there are many instances of wonderful partnerships in ministry – like Priscilla and Aquila! – women and men as fellow workers in the service of the gospel. And we may safely assume this was happening in Ephesus.

- **“a woman”**

Was Paul talking about *women* in general or *wives* in particular?¹ If verses 9 and 10 are general (as they seem) – and verse 8 is about men, rather than just *husbands* – then *gune* in verses 11ff. refers to “women” – not just married women.

- **“learn”**

What a woman should learn is clearly implied in the context of the letter. She should learn the sound teaching that accords with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which Paul had been entrusted (see 1:10, 11 and 2:7). A major theme of this letter, is the importance of “these things” (as Paul repeatedly refers to the sound teaching) being carefully taught.

In this letter, when Paul says in 2:11 that a woman should *learn* – it is clear that he means she should learn *these things*.

What is striking in 2:11, however, is his emphasis on the *way* in which he encourages a woman to learn: “Let a woman learn *in quietness, in all submission.*”

What does that mean?

- **“in quietness”**

“In quietness” does not here mean “in silence.” The same word is used in 2:2, where prayer for rulers is in order “that we may live a peaceful and *quiet* life, in all godliness and reverence.” The opposite of learning “in quietness” would not be learning noisily, but leaning belligerently – antagonistically. On the contrary, a woman is to learn “in quietness.”

¹ For an argument that this passage is directed to married women (in the first instance), because of the reference to childbearing in verse 15, see Paul W. Barnett, “Wives and Women’s Ministry (1 Timothy 2:11-15),” *Evangelical Quarterly* 61:3 (1989), pp. 225-238, especially p. 229.

- **“in all submission”**

This sense is supported by the phrase “in all submission.” If we remember that Paul is talking about the healthy teaching that accords with the glorious gospel with which he was entrusted (1:10, 11), then the call to learn with a submissive, quiet spirit is obviously fitting.

Of course what strikes us as strange – and has a lot to do with the fact that this passage grates on our ears today – is the fact that Paul addresses this exhortation to *women*.

If he called on *all Christians* to “learn quietly and in all submissiveness,” we would not have been perplexed. And part (but only part) of what I want us to see here is that Paul *could* have said that. That is, when in verse 8 he urged men to pray with holy hands without anger or quarrelling – he *could* have urged women to do the same. By what he said to men he was not suggesting it is OK for *women* to pray with *unholy* hands, *angry* and *quarrelsome*. And when in verse 9 he said that women should adorn themselves respectably, modestly and with self-control – he *could* have said something similar to men. By what he said to women he was not suggesting that it is OK for men to dress outrageously, indecently, or to draw attention to themselves, or self-indulgently. That is not godliness for women or men. Just so, I take it that he is not suggesting in verse 11 that it is OK for a man to learn of God’s grace, belligerently, antagonistically or defiantly. That is no way for *anyone* to learn the teaching that accords with the glorious gospel.

But at the same time, the words Paul directs to men and to women in verses 8-10 do have a particular relevance or appropriateness to the ones addressed. They touch on an aspect of life that is particularly important for men (in verse 8) and women (in verses 9, 10) to hear. And the same is true in verse 11.

The word “submission” at the end of verse 11 does not *only* mean the submission to the teaching that we all ought to show, but “submission” that is particularly relevant and appropriate for women who profess godliness.

In other words in verse 11 Paul is talking about godliness in learning: quiet submissiveness in learning the glorious gospel of God’s grace. But he is describing the particular shape that godliness in learning is to take for women – and it includes this idea of a woman’s “submission.”

Here is *the* idea that we find so difficult today. That is partly because it is easily misunderstood. I am of the opinion that the word “submission” has acquired connotations today that distort the idea. But, as we will see, even when we peel away those connotations, the Bible’s statements are difficult for us – because we have sanctified our individualistic notions of freedom: *independence* is the way of freedom – and the path to human happiness.

Let’s spend a few minutes considering the Biblical idea of “submission.” It deserves a whole talk, but I can only give it a few minutes here.

The Greek word is a compound of *hupo*, “under” and *taxis* or *tasso*, which is the idea of order – in the sense of *orderly*, as well as the sense of things being *in* order: first, second, third, and so on. *Taxis* is used to describe the good *order* that Christ brings to life (as in “I rejoice to see your *order* and the firmness of your faith in Christ,” Col 2:5). Redemption brings *order* to disordered lives and disordered relationships.

Hupo-tasso then appears repeatedly in the New Testament in an entirely positive sense. As someone has put it, the New Testament teaches a “sub-ordinationist ethic.” This is the way in which the new humanity is constituted. It is the way in which the disintegration of human society is redeemed: not by individual liberation from restraints and obligations to others, but by each gladly placing him or herself *under* the ones God has placed “over” us. Disorder gives way to ordered relationships.

And so ordering our lives under others is a characteristic of the Christian life (Eph 5:21²): not independence that destroys community, but order that binds us together. Just as the Son will forever be “under” the one who put all things “under” him (1 Cor 15:28), so believers are to order our lives “under” God (Heb 12:9; Jas 4:7) and “under” Christ (Eph 5:24), and “under” the governing authorities (Rom 13:1, 5; Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13), and “under” ministers of the gospel (1 Cor 16:16). Christian slaves are to order their lives “under” their masters (Tit 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18); younger men “under” older men (1 Pet 5:5); children “under” parents (Luke 2:51; 1 Tim 3:4); and wives “under” husbands (Eph 5:21-22; Col 3:18; Tit 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1, 5).³ *Upto-tasso* is a word that affirms order in relationships.

What does “under” mean in this context?

Here is my attempt at a definition of Christian sub-mission or sub-ordination: **Christian believers are called to recognise, acknowledge and welcome the responsibilities God has given to others for our welfare.** Since husbands are to sacrificially love and care for their wives, wives are to recognise and welcome their husbands’ responsibility. Since pastors are to watch over those in their care, believers are to recognise and welcome their pastor’s responsibility. Since governments are “God’s servant for your good” (Rom 13:4), believers are to recognise and welcome their authority. Sub-mission – or sub-ordination – is the opposite of autonomy and independence. It is an acceptance of dependence.

Absolute submission is only given to God. Our submission to one another is limited by the kind and extent of the responsibility we have for one another.

² Although some interpreters take this verse to mean *mutual* submission, in the sense that each believer is to submit to each other believer in the same way, Peter O’Brien has argued convincingly that this is unlikely. He refers to Luke 2:15; 24:32; 1 Cor 11:33; Gal 6:2 and Rev 6:4 as further examples where “one another” does not mean symmetrical reciprocity.

³ Cf. John Woodhouse, *Colossians and Philemon: So Walk in Him*, Focus on the Bible Commentary Series (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2011), pp. 217-221; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 398-438; George Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Carlisle, England: Eerdmans and Paternoster, 1992), p. 139.

Now the Bible recognises and affirms a certain responsibility given to men to care for and put themselves out for women. This responsibility comes to full expression in marriage, but the kind of consideration a husband is to show towards his wife is consistent with a more general consideration that men ought to show towards women as the need or opportunity arises. Likewise the acknowledgement and acceptance a wife is to show towards her husband's responsibility for her is consistent with a more general acknowledgement and acceptance that women ought to show towards men's consideration of them in various situations.

In other words there is a submission that is appropriate to women in relation to men. It only makes sense in the context of recognising the responsibility of men to self-sacrificially care for women.

Let's return to 1 Timothy 2:11. The godly learning of the truth by women will include – as the situation provides – appropriate submission – as women. As they learn in the Christian fellowship, women are not expected to deny or overturn this order.

I hasten to say that it would not be a surprise if Paul urged men to learn with a godly recognition and affirmation of the order of the man/woman relationship. However here he focuses on what this means for women.

That this is the gist of Paul's meaning in verse 11 seems to be confirmed by verse 12 where the converse is stated: "And I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness."

Verse 12: And I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness.

Notice the general parallel between verses 11 and 12. Verse 11 is about learning; verse 12 is about teaching – presumably the teaching behind the learning of verse 11. Verse 11 is about submission; verse 12 is about the converse idea, authority. Verse 11 is about quietness; and so is verse 12. Exactly the same phrase "in quietness" that stands at the beginning of verse 11 in the Greek text is repeated at the end of verse 12.⁴

A connection between verses 11 and 12 seems clear. What Paul does not permit in verse 12 is a consequence of what he desires in verse 11. If you like, verse 12 is a commentary on verse 11.

• **"And I do not permit"**

Paul's language becomes just a little more assertive at this point. In verse 1 of this chapter he said, "Therefore I urge ..." In verse 8 he said, "Therefore I desire ..." These expressions certainly carried considerable weight when we remember that it was the apostle of Christ

⁴ The word order in the Greek text is as follows:

¹¹ A woman in quietness let her learn in all submission.

¹² But to teach a woman I do not permit or to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness.

This produces a certain pattern of ideas: ABCD – CADB. In broader terms Paul Barnett sees a chiasmic form here. Barnett, "Wives," p. 229.

Jesus by command of God (1:1) who was speaking. But verse 12 seems, if anything, a little firmer or emphatic, "And I do not permit ..."

Some argue that what Paul is about to say in verse 12 is limited to the particular situation in late first century Ephesus. Even at this early stage this seems unlikely. "I urge ..." and "I desire ..." in verses 1 and 8 are explicitly general in application: prayer for *all* people because of God's grace towards *all*; and godly prayer "in every place." Without some indication to the contrary, "I do not permit ..." in verse 12 sounds likewise general in scope. It will sound more so as we read on.

- **"a woman ... a man"**

The context is men and women in the Christian fellowship: verse 12 – "a woman ... a man." Godliness entails women participating with men in the learning (verse 11), but in such a way that honours the order of the relationship. This, in turn, means that a woman ought not to "to teach [a man] or to exercise authority over a man."

Perhaps the most vexed question for those who understand this text along the general lines I am presenting, and want to apply it faithfully, is, To what activities do these words apply? Should the text be given the widest possible application – meaning that men must never learn anything from women – and women must never have any position of leadership or management over men? Or is the application highly restricted, referring only to certain official authority in the church and certain official kinds of church teaching? Or what?

Let's think about the two expressions here: "to teach" and "to exercise authority over."

- **"to teach"**

There have been attempts to argue that the teaching Paul is prohibiting here is the false teaching that was going on in Ephesus (see 1:3) Nothing in the context suggests this. On the contrary, since it is certain that in verse 11 what women are encouraged to be learning is the sound teaching of which this letter says so much, verse 12 has to be about that teaching unless there were some indication of a sudden change of subject. Furthermore, how strange it would be for Paul to say that he does not permit *women* to teach heresy to *men*. Unless, of course, there is some reason to think that the false teaching was being purveyed only by women – and all Ephesian women were caught up in it. But there is no evidence of that. On the contrary the false teachers we know of were men – like Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1:20.

The reference to "teaching" 2:12 must be a reference to the activity of teaching that is a major theme through this letter. It is described in 1:10, 11 as "sound teaching in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God." The apostle Paul had been appointed a *teacher* of the nations (2:7), that all people might come to the knowledge of the truth (2:4). And so he urges Timothy, "If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good *teaching* that you have followed" (4:6). "Command and *teach* these things, [Timothy]" (4:11). "Keep a close watch on yourself

and on the *teaching*" (4:16). "Teach and urge these things" (6:2). Timothy was assisted by elders who "labour in word and *teaching*" (5:17). This letter is very concerned about the sound and healthy teaching in the fellowship of believers – the teaching that has as its goal "love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a genuine faith" (1:5).

"To teach" in 1 Timothy 2:12 would naturally be understood in this context, just as "learn" in verse 11 presupposes this activity.

There is an important description of this *teaching* in 4:13, where Timothy is to devote himself to "*the reading* [that is, the reading of Scripture], to *the exhortation* and to *the teaching*." This is not three separate activities, but three aspects of the one activity that is elsewhere simply called "the teaching" (e.g. 4:16). Timothy is to teach by the *reading* of Scripture, the *exhortation* of his hearers to hear and heed, and the *teaching* Scripture's meaning and significance. This teaching is of vital importance for the health of the church.

Therefore when Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach ... a man," he is not saying that a woman should never convey information of any kind to a man. He is talking about this essential activity in the Christian fellowship: *the teaching*.

The question for us is, in what activities does "the teaching" take place in our Christian fellowships today? Where is "the teaching" that sets the standard for faith and life?

My view is that that is what the sermon is meant to be in today's church life. Perhaps there are other ways in which we devote ourselves to the *reading* of Scripture, to the *exhortation* and to the *teaching* – but I think that the sermon is the obvious public example today of where we do – or should be doing – *the teaching* about which 1 Timothy says so much.

(By the way, if I am right here, we are a little misled by our habit of calling our sermons "preaching." That confuses us. It would be closer to New Testament thinking to call the exposition of Scripture in church "the teaching." But I will leave that hobbyhorse for another day!)

Our surprise and perplexity, of course, is why Paul would say, "I do not permit a *woman* to teach ... a man."

- **"nor to exercise authority"**

A clue is given in the following phrase: "or to exercise authority over a man."

There are two big questions here: (1) what does the Greek word translated "to exercise authority over" really mean?, and (2) how is it connected to teaching?

The Greek word occurs only here in the New Testament. This is not unusual. In fact there are nearly 2,000 words that appear only once in the Greek New Testament.⁵ However this one, the Greek verb *authentein*, has been the subject of an astonishing amount of scholarly examination in recent times. From its appearance in Greek literature over several centuries a range of possible meanings have been proposed. Common to almost all suggested meanings is the idea of *authority*. Much (although not all) of the debate can be reduced to whether the word conveys a negative idea of authority (like “domineer,” “play the tyrant”) or is neutral or positive (like “exercise authority”). The context has to guide us as to whether Paul means to say, “I do not permit a woman to *domineer* (or be a *tyrant*) over a man” or “I do not permit a woman ... to *exercise authority* over a man.”

To summarise a wide-ranging debate, in 1 Timothy 2:12 *authentein* would only have a negative sense if “to teach” also had a negative sense.⁶ In other words, if Paul had said “I do not permit a woman to *engage in false teaching* or to *domineer over* a man,” he could have used *authentein*. But that is not what he said. We have seen that the teaching on view in verse 12 is sound teaching.

If that is so, it follows that *authentein* in this context means “to exercise authority over” – without any negative connotations to the idea itself.

The question now is, What kind of exercise of authority does Paul mean, and why does he not allow this to be exercised by a woman over a man?

Authority is defined – and indeed limited – by responsibility. Authority is the right to fulfil responsibilities. Authority is not the right to do what you like, or to boss people around for your own purposes. That is the abuse of authority. When a person is given authority, what they should be aware of is not the authority as such, but the responsibilities for which it has been given.

Then to recognise and acknowledge someone’s authority is to recognise and acknowledge their responsibilities. (To accept the government’s authority to set speed limits on the road is to accept the government’s responsibility for road safety. And so on.)

Now here in 1 Timothy 2:12, in the context of men and women in the Christian fellowship, the idea of authority is an echo of the idea of submission that we thought about in verse 11. Women are exhorted to welcome and gladly accept the responsibility men have to consider them (that acceptance is “submission”); they ought not to seek to overthrow the order. “To

⁵ Henry Scott Baldwin, “An Important Word: *authentein* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” in Andreas J Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds, *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2005), p. 39.

⁶ Andreas J Köstenberger has argued convincingly that the syntax of this sentence requires the verbs “to teach” and “to exercise authority” to be either both negative or both positive. Andreas J Köstenberger, “A Complex Sentence: The Syntax of 1 Timothy 2:12,” in Andreas J Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds, *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2005), pp. 53-84.

exercise authority over” men, in context, is the opposite of the submission we have seen in verse 11.

Does the context help us any further? I believe it does. Immediately after our passage (ignore the chapter break) Paul writes about the “overseer” in God’s household, the church. The overseer has a responsibility – and therefore authority – for the lives of the believers. In particular he gives sound teaching and rebukes those who contradict it (see Titus 1:9). The overseer’s responsibility is focused in the activity of teaching.

It seems to me clear therefore that in context “to teach” is a particular and important example of “exercising authority over” – both of which the overseer does. In 2:12, however, Paul is referring, not to the office, but to the activities. In the Christian fellowship of men and women, Paul says, this teaching and this authority should not be exercised by women.

• **“but to be in quietness”**

And at the end of verse 12 Paul returns to the concept of quietness. “But to be *in quietness*” – exactly the same phrase as in verse 11. Verses 11 and 12 are both pointing to the godly and gentle manner in which a Christian woman is to be learning the truth for which Paul had been appointed preacher and apostle and teacher (2:8).

You do not need to be a genius to notice that a short time ago we had a woman very helpfully speaking to us all about modesty.⁷ Was this something that Paul would not permit? We are keen to explore the appropriate and faithful application of Paul’s words here today. We decided to have Jane speak to us as she has as part of that exploration.

My view is that 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 does not mean that women may never say anything in church, nor that women may not inform us all in various ways, nor that women may never say anything “up front.” I am of the opinion that Jane’s speaking to us was not a contravention of 1 Timothy 2 for the following reasons:

- (1) I do not think that it was *the teaching* about which Paul says so much in this letter. Jane shared helpful and wise insights about the importance of modesty in dress.
- (2) While certainly helpful for us all to hear, what Jane shared with us was not *exercising authority* in the way in which we see in Paul’s “Command and teach these things.”
- (3) For these reasons I do not think that what Jane was doing was a denial of proper submission and godly quietness.

⁷ At the Conference where this paper was delivered, Jane Tooher spoke on the subject of raised by 1 Timothy 2:9, namely a woman’s modesty in clothing. These comments relate to Jane’s talk.

Verses 13 and 14 now provide reasons for what Paul has said. That is the most natural meaning of “For” at the beginning of verse 13.

Verse 13: For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

Verse 13: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” – a clear reference to Genesis 2, and a decisive indication that Paul is talking about men and women in general, not just the men and women of first century Ephesus.

Paul clearly sees the sequence of the creation of Adam and Eve reflecting something about their relationship – and something about what I have been calling the order of the relationship between men and women.

In the creation scene of Genesis 2 the man is formed by God, and given work to do. The work is described as working the garden and keeping it – caring for God’s creation.

It was immediately apparent that the man was not up to the task. At least it was apparent that *alone* he was not up to the task. He needed a helper who corresponded to him. Woman was made as that helping partner.

In the creation narrative in Genesis 2 the man was given the primary responsibility for the work – this work of care and service. He was given a partner in that work, in whom he rejoiced (“This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!”). He named her “woman.”

The man and the woman were formed – not as independent individuals who are now to live and work separately, or even in competition – nor as identical persons whose relationship is in every way symmetrical. No. “Adam was formed first, then Eve.” Adam’s responsibility to care for Eve, his helper, was not identical to Eve’s responsibility to help Adam in the work God had entrusted to him.

This seems to me to be a very natural way to see the narrative in Genesis 2. If you can’t see this, try to read Genesis 2, but swap the man and the woman – and see if it doesn’t present a different understanding of man and woman.

Of course Adam and Eve were not just man and woman, they were husband and wife. But the responsibility of men to care for, where necessary to protect, to put themselves out for women, and the duty of women to honour and respect this responsibility of men, is not something that only comes into existence in marriage. Marriage expresses in a particular, intimate, wonderful way a relationship that ought to be expressed in hundreds of ways as men and women live in the good order of their creation by God. “Adam was formed first, then Eve.”

Now Paul seems to be saying in 1 Timothy 2:12 and 13 that this order should be affirmed and expressed in the teaching and the authority that orders the life of the Christian fellowship. That is why, Paul seems to say, it is not appropriate for the teaching and the authority to be

exercised by the women of the fellowship. He sums this reasoning up as “Adam was formed first, then Eve.”

Verse 14: and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Then he adds verse 14: “and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”

He is now pointing us to Genesis 3.

When he says, “the woman was deceived,” he is citing the words of Eve: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (Gen 3:13).

When he says, “Adam was not deceived,” he is not shifting blame from Adam. On the contrary. If anything, the fact that Adam disobeyed God in full knowledge of what he was doing only underlines his *culpability*.

Nor do I think he is saying that Adam was superior in some other way – not being deceived.

Rather, he is pointing to the way in which, just as Genesis 2 represents the order of creation in the relationship between man and woman, so Genesis 3 exemplifies the disordering of that relationship. Instead of the man caring for and leading his wife in serving God in his creation (including, by the way, teaching her the word that God had spoken to him), one of the creatures God had made deceived the woman (including, by the way, teaching her differently from the word God had spoken – the serpent was the first false teacher!), who then misled her husband because of this teaching into disobeying God. The disobedience, you see, included the overturning of the order.

Now we must take care with this. The sensitivities of our time and culture can lead us to read into this what is not being said. I do not believe that Paul is saying that because of what happened in Genesis 3, if a woman teaches a man, then she *will* mislead him into disobeying God. It is not that the disordering of the relationship *caused* the false teaching in Genesis 3. But the false teaching did involve the disorder. He is not saying that a woman who teaches a man will be a false teacher. What he is saying is that in the great paradigm of false teaching in Genesis 3 Adam and Eve showed us how not to do everything – including how we ought not to disregard, dishonour, disrespect, distrust the order of the relationship between men and women.

And that is why, Paul says in 1 Timothy 2, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.”

As we come to apply this teaching I encourage us to see honouring the right and good relationship between men and women as the point at issue. To take 1 Tim 2:12 out of the context of that concern and treat it as a law, to be interpreted as a law can miss the point altogether. A man who puts down women, and quotes 1 Tim 2:12 in the process is not being

faithful to this word. A woman who never speaks publicly, but resents men who do is not being faithful to this word. When the question arises, Is it appropriate for a woman to do this or that in the Christian fellowship, the question I want to reflect on is not *just* whether it is “the teaching” in the sense of 1 Tim 2:12, but Is this honouring and respecting and affirming the responsibilities God has given us towards one another? 1 Tim 2 is saying, in the context of that concern, that it is not normally appropriate for a woman to be doing the gospel teaching or exercising the pastoral authority in the Christian fellowship of men and women.

This encourages me to say that men might like to reflect, in this context, on the male responsibilities entailed in the fact that “Adam was formed first.”

Verse 15: Yet she will be saved through the childbirth — if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

Finally we come to verse 15, which is often presented as though it is terribly complicated and difficult and casts a shadow over the whole passage because (it is sometimes suggested) no one knows what to make of verse 15. And if you cannot make sense of verse 15 how can you be so dogmatic about the rest of the passage?

I hope that I am not being presumptuous when I say that 1 Tim 2:15 really is very straightforward!

An important principle in considering parts of the Bible that may at first appear difficult is to work out what is clear and allow that to shine light on whatever is less clear.

Let’s apply that principle to 1 Tim 2:15.

- **“Yet she will be saved”**

The first part that is clear is “Yet she will be saved.” There is some debate about whether “saved” means salvation in the full gospel sense, or just “kept safe.” It is pretty clear, however, that in this context Paul is speaking of salvation in the fullest sense.⁸

Furthermore, “she will be *saved*” in 2:15 is in the context of the reference to Genesis 3, where the woman became a transgressor. “But she will be *saved*” is clearly (in my judgment) a reference to wonder of God’s grace. The one from whom Paul had received extraordinary mercy (1:13, 16) will have mercy – the same mercy because of the same saviour – on the woman.

That is the main thing that verse 15 says about woman: “she will be saved.” It is perfectly clear: an affirmation that women are full participants in the salvation that we enjoy because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Do not miss this. If we are thinking of the

⁸ This “salvation” is a theme of the whole letter. The first sentence spoke of “God our *saviour*.” The glorious gospel is summed up in 1:15 as “Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners.” In 2:3, 4 we hear that “God our *saviour* ... desires all people to be *saved*.” In 4:10 we will hear about how “we have our hope set on the living God, who is the *saviour* of all people, especially of those who believe.” Timothy is told in 4:16 about *saving* himself and his hearers.

relationships between men and women in the Christian fellowship, do not take lightly the fact that we share this wonder: God is *our* saviour – Christ Jesus came into the world to save *us*.

- **“if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self control”**

The second half of 1 Tim 2:15 is equally clear: “if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self control.” Of course salvation belongs only to those who continue in the Christian life. Salvation is certainly a gift of God’s mercy, but it demands godly living and faithfulness.

Again: do not miss this. As we think about the relationships between men and women in the Christian fellowship, do not undervalue our participating together in faith in Christ, in love for him and for one another, in holiness of behaviour, in the godly discipline of self-control.

There is the main (and clear!) statement of 1 Tim 2:15 about a woman: she will be saved, provided of course that they continue in the Christian life.

- **“through the childbirth”**

It is important to see that the verse is quite clear in what it is saying, before we note that just three words *are* a bit puzzling. These three words do not change what is clear, but add something. The two words I have translated: “through the childbirth.”

Although there has been a huge amount written about those three words, I believe it turns out again to be not very complicated.

In the history of interpretation there have been just two main understandings of the phrase, both of which are fairly straightforward.

Both understandings take note of the context, namely the reference to Genesis 3 in the previous verse.

One popular view over the centuries has been that “through *the* childbirth” means “through the birth of *the* child” – that is, the seed of the woman referred to in Gen 3:15, who will crush the serpent’s head. In other words, Paul may be referring to the remarkable role that a woman was to play in salvation: a woman would bear the child – the promised one. The saviour of women and men would be born of a woman. “Through the childbirth” then describes the means by which the woman – as well as the man – will be saved, and points to the astonishing role a woman would play in our salvation.

On this understanding “through” means “by means of.”

The other possibility is that “through childbirth” is pointing to the distinctive experience of woman in human life, referred to in God’s words of punishment to the woman in Gen 3:16:

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.”

That was the consequence of the woman's disobedience according to Genesis 3. Paul is now saying (on this view) that though childbearing is the sphere in which women now particularly experience the hand of God's judgment, she will yet be *saved*. She will be brought *through* this experience of judgment, to salvation, provided, of course, that she continues in the life of faith, the life of love and holiness and self-control.

"Through childbirth" then describes the typical – though of course not universal – experience of women. In the context of the distinctive womanly experience, she will be saved.

On this understanding "through" means "in the context of."

But WHETHER Paul means "by means of the birth of *the* Child" (the child who has now come into the world to save sinners) OR "in the context of the distinctive experience of being a woman" (and it is just possible that both understandings are intended and the ambiguity deliberate), 1 Tim 2:15 is asserting the reality of *salvation* for women, just as the chapter has began emphasising salvation for all people.