



WOMEN TEACHING MEN THE BIBLE: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Description

I first became aware very early on in my Christian life that women's ministry in the presence of men was controversial. As a new Christian in a Brethren assembly I found myself in the midst of a debate as to whether women could pray aloud in the morning meeting (communion) in the presence of men. The elders resolved eventually that they could not because of the Bible was against it. In particular, 1 Timothy 2:8 shows "so the argument ran – that Paul believes that only men (tous androus) should pray in the assembly: "I desire that in every place men should pray" (ESV). That was in the 1960s.

Many years later, in the 1980s, I was on mission with a team of theological students in Sydney. I asked one of the senior students, a woman, to speak evangelistically at a girl's high school. It seemed to make a lot of sense. But she was not only reluctant but became extremely anxious. I had a pastoral situation on my hands. I soon found out that she had been taught that it was against the bible for her to preach in the presence of any males on the team.

At Trinity Evangelical Divinity School there are two women at present who may become faculty: one in NT and one in ST. Most of the faculty is Complementarian. That is to say they believe that there are restriction in roles for women in the church, and so they have wrestled with the question of women teaching the Bible to men. Their general view is that there is no problem in their doing so since Trinity is not the church and so a passage such as 1 Timothy 2:12 does not apply: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over man; rather she is to remain quiet" (ESV). [1](#)

In May of this year I found myself lecturing at Oak Hill College in London and asked to speak informally on the subject of women preaching in the presence of men. Women ordinands had preached in the chapel and some male students had had a problem with this. The same question is being asked in so many different places. In fact this year alone I have been asked the question whether women may preach the Bible when men are present by folk living on three continents. Our question then is a real one, not an artificial one.

The common thread to these stories from the 1960s, 80s and 2000s is the idea that for women to preach or teach or even pray aloud in the presence of men is contrary to Scripture and therefore the faithful Christian cannot endorse any such practices and since preaching and teaching the Bible is fundamental to leadership in the church women cannot therefore lead congregations.

So it is out of concern for the church that I want to ask: Is it right for women to preach to mixed congregations or assemblies? The word “right” here means consistent with the Scriptures in general and Paul’s prohibition on women teaching men in 1 Tim 2 in particular. “Mixed”, of course, means a congregation of both men and women.

My own view on the question is that these days it is appropriate for women to preach to mixed congregations if they faithfully expound the Scriptures. In other words godliness and giftedness are the keys and not one’s sex.

In a brief response to a question like this one – sketch really – I will only give seven lines of consideration for holding this view and point out that full argumentation in support (theological and exegetical) would belong more properly in an academic theological journal. And by “consideration” I mean things to bear in mind in making a decision about a particular matter.

Consideration 1: Authority comes from God and his Word

First, authority comes from God and his Word and not in part from the sex of the preacher. The preacher’s authority lies in faithfully explaining that Word and applying it to the lives of those who hear, not in his or her sex. When I hear a man or woman preach I am to be like the Bereans in Acts 17:11, who when they heard Paul, searched the Scriptures to see if these things that he was telling them were so. This is a good Protestant principle. The text also tells us that these Bereans, in so doing, were more noble than the Thessalonians who had not done so. And so here I am a male writing on these matters. So my teaching too needs to be tested by the Berean approach.

Consideration 2: 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Trinitarian Taxis (Order)

Second, I am not persuaded that a woman preaching to a mixed congregation somehow overturns our view of the essential Trinity and with it good church order.² On the matter of the Trinity, the key text used by some is 1 Corinthians 11:3, where Paul writes: “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (ESV). The argument runs that this text is a window into the essential Trinity and that congregational life, family life and married life ought to reflect this order.³ For example, Carrie Sandom argues: “It is this pattern of relationships that is to be modeled in family life and in church life as God arranges His creation to reflect the ordering of relationships within the Godhead (1Corinthians 11:3).”⁴

What is so seldom observed on this view is that Paul does not write that the head of the Son is the Father, but that the head of Christ is God. The context is messianic not the Trinity ad intra. In fact, 1 Corinthians 11:3 is one of three “subordinationist” texts in 1 Corinthians which are best seen together as referring to the economy of salvation or the Trinity ad extra, presupposing the incarnation and messianic vocation of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 3:21-23; 11:3; 15:24-28). Therefore, when the argument is run, that for women to preach to men is to fly in the face of the very nature of God as the essential Trinity, a category mistake has been made. A messianic reference has been mistaken for a Trinitarian one. Technically put, the text is not about the essential Trinity (“modes of subsistence”) but about the Trinity

operating economically (“modes of operation”) as the great Presbyterian theologian, B. B. Warfield rightly argued and others more recently have too (e.g. Millard J. Erickson).⁵

Consideration 3: Women Teaching Men and Good Church Order

Third, then, I am not persuaded that a woman preaching to a mixed congregation somehow threatens good church order. With regard to church order, the New Testament knows of only one head of the church: namely, Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord Himself (Eph 4:15-16). My greatest problem with some of the appeals I hear to male headship, whether employed explicitly or implicitly to exclude the woman preacher, is Christological. We have forgotten who the head of the church is and have put someone else in Christ’s place. Some can so stress male leadership of the congregation and denomination it is as though our Lord is on leave and is not effectively the head of the church, which is his body.

Further, the argument that the church is an assembly of Christians made up of families of Christians and that the head of the family is the father and therefore the congregation as the gathered family of God is to be headed by males in order to reflect a divinely sanctioned order is questionable. We need to avoid reading our family structures into a first century text. The church is the household of God and in New Testament era households were far more complex as social realities than our nuclear family in the modern West.⁶ In that era, for example, there were women who headed households and male slaves would have had to defer to them.

Consideration 4: The Invention of the Printing Press

Fourth, when I ask how I access the authoritative Word of God, I find that I can only thank God’s providence for the invention of the printing press. What I mean is this. I do not live in the material situation of those Christians at Ephesus hearing 1Timothy read.

At the most those Christians had a “copy” of the Old Testament (if so, probably LXX), a letter or two from Paul, Timothy to talk to and those elders set up by Timothy on Paul’s instructions to ensure that the gospel was held firm in the face of false teachers at Ephesus. From a formal point of view, like those Ephesian Christians, I live under the Word of God, but materially I have the completed Bible (or canon) in a handy form to live by. So much of the debate misses this point and acts as though we all were still in first century Ephesus before the completion of the canon (i.e., a list of authoritative Scriptures). Let me call this mistake then a canonical theology mistake of failing to note the flow of redemptive history and its accompanying revelation and the canonization of that revelation.

We so easily put ourselves into the biblical text, forgetting that historically we live long after its canonization. J.I. Packer brings out the significance of this fact for the debate in the following way:

Teaching, in other words, is a different exercise today from what it was in Paul’s day. I think it is an open question whether in our day Paul would have forbidden a woman to teach from the Bible. It is an open question whether he would have regarded what happened to Eve in the Garden of Eden as sufficient reason for forbidding a woman to teach from the Bible. When you teach from the Bible, in any situation at all, what you are saying to people is, “Look, I am trying to tell you what it says. I speak as to wise men and women. You have your Bibles. You follow along. You judge what I say.” No claim to personal authority with regard to the substance of the message is being made at all. It seems to me that this significant difference between teaching then and teaching now does, in fact, mean that the prohibition on women preaching and teaching need not apply.⁷

Packer's point links with my first consideration. Authority is to be found in the Word of God which is now in its final inscripturated form.

Consideration 5: 1 Timothy 2:12 not a Barrier

But what about 1 Timothy 2:12 and the bit about women not teaching men? For a start how could they? They needed to learn from the right source. The context runs:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 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 childbearing⁸ if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety (NIV)

So Paul tells them to learn. Indeed, as they were, they were in danger of, indeed some may have fallen into, committing Eve's mistake of listening to that false teacher, the Devil, rather than to ask Adam who had God's Word about the trees and what not to eat (Gen 2:16-17). These Ephesian women are not to follow her example, but to submit to the proper teaching structure that Timothy was to set up. They were to learn from Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles – via Timothy and the teaching elders – and submit to that teaching and no one else. We find that authoritative teaching now in the canonical Scriptures and in preaching that is faithful to the Scriptures (see the preceding paragraph and Packer's comment and Consideration 1).

In my view Paul's argument is not based on a difference in createdness (ontology, e.g. women as inferior males, the products of defective male sperm, as taught in the venerable Aquinas tradition stretching back over 800 years) but is an analogical one based on the creation-fall narrative sequence.⁹ If it were about differences in createdness or in creation order then why should it not apply to every sphere of life (marriage, family, church, education, business and government)?

As I compare Scripture with Scripture (the Analogy of Faith) I ask where else does Paul refer to Eve and I find that it is in a context of a church also troubled by false teaching. In 2 Corinthians 11:1-6, Paul pleads with the Corinthians not to be like Eve who listened to the serpent and was led astray. The great apostle sees some analogy between the Corinthian situation and that of Genesis 3 and the 2 Corinthian text shows how he can use the Eve story analogically. I would argue that Paul is arguing similarly in 1 Timothy 2. He is appealing to the flow of the Genesis 2-4 narrative on my view.⁹ Adam had the Word of God but remained silent (Gen. 3:6). Hence Eve was deceived as she had not heard that exact word from God according to the narrative.¹⁰ Her remark to the serpent shows that (cf. Gen 2:16-17 and Gen 3:2-3, where did the idea of not even touching the fruit come from?). She had not been created first. Adam was and was addressed first before Eve was even created. Moreover even though he had the Word of God, Adam listened to Eve, rather than teach that Word (Gen. 3:17). Well Timothy in contrast is not to be silent. He is to teach the Ephesians these things (1 Timothy 4:11-16). The Ephesian women, however, need to be silent, learn and not attempt to be teachers or learn from the wrong teachers (1 Tim 1:3-7). Again, the Word of God (gospel) to be listened to and embraced comes from Paul, Timothy and the elders and through that teaching structure and from no one else.¹¹

A friend who read this argument of mine commented: "I have asked myself: If Paul had wanted to say that authoritative teaching in the church is not appropriately done by women, what would he have said beyond what he does say in 1 Timothy 2:12? I cannot see that he could have made it clearer." (Original emphasis.) I agree with my Complementarian friend up to a point.¹² Paul does not want women to

teach men at Ephesus, nor most of the men to teach other men it seems, let alone teach women. In fact in the first chapter of the letter, two of the problem men are named (Hymenaeus and Alexander, 1 Tim 1:18-20). The only ones he wants teaching there are himself, Timothy as a proxy and the elders.¹³ The issue though is whether 1 Timothy 2:11-13 is transoccasional or whether it is ad hoc dealing with a pastoral crisis and therefore we look for the principles to live by rather than to a pattern to reproduce.

What intrigues me is that when it comes to women's congregational ministry at Ephesus Paul appears to give them much less scope, than say in 1 Corinthians 11. For example, there is not talk of women prophesying in the congregation. Why? The best explanation that I can find is that Paul is deliberately circumscribing communications at Ephesus because false teachers (see 1 Timothy 1 again) are undermining his apostolic authority and causing harm. For example, he even has to assure Timothy his associate in ministry that he, Paul, is not lying about his apostolic authority (1 Timothy 2:7). Did Timothy need to hear that Paul was not a liar? Wasn't he convinced of Paul's integrity and apostolic vocation already? My guess is that 1 Timothy would have been read aloud in a congregational setting or in various Ephesian house meetings and that Paul's defense of his own integrity needed to be heard by these others. There was a crisis of some magnitude at Ephesus. Indeed the epistle begins and ends with the problem of false teaching (cf. 1 Tim. 1: 3-7; 6:20).

The take home message for us these days is that a congregation needs a duly appointed teaching structure that is faithful to the apostolic gospel and will preach it and defend it.

This brief reconstruction of what Paul's argument is about in 1 Tim 2:11-15 is just that, a reconstruction. (By the way, the challenge to the interpreter is not simply to put the text in its context, vital though that is. Rather the fuller task is to place the text in its context in its argument in its literary unit in its book in the canon in the light of the flow of redemptive history.) The fact is that Paul's argument leaves a lot of the steps out and so whoever interprets it has to be speculative at some point and attempt to reconstruct the missing steps. I am no exception. Technically Paul's argument is enthymemic-like or, put another way, elliptical and allusive in that a number of steps have been left out because presumably Timothy being Paul's associate could easily put them in as one familiar with his teaching.

Anyone who thinks that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is not a difficult text to interpret needs to read any half way decent commentary.

Consideration 6: The Problem of Primitivism

The problem with primitivism is the attempt to set up New Testament patterns of church order as though our social world and that of the New Testament coincides at every point.¹⁴ It is hard to be consistent on this one. When I was in the Brethren women were not to preach or pray in the presence of men based on an appeal to 1 Tim 2:8.¹⁵ It always puzzled me, as a new convert, why the assembly did not also have a welfare system to look after widows as found in 1 Tim 5. In other words, if you are technically a primitivist, it becomes harder and harder not to be arbitrary in what you retrieve of New Testament patterns.

Consideration 7: The Matter of Dogmatic Rank

Let me raise a question about perspective—how theologically important is this issue? (Pastorally it can be very, very important indeed. But that's not my question.) Classically Anglicans distinguish

matters of faith and morals (what the gospel is and the moral life that arises from it) from matters of order (how we organize our corporate life).¹⁶ The question of women preaching to mixed audiences is a matter of order not of faith. What a person thinks about the issue is not a condition of Christian fellowship. Otherwise we invent a gospel plus. (Jesus plus a particular view of women's ministry as the condition of Christian fellowship.) Contrast our present issue with how hard it is to have Christian fellowship with someone who denies that Christ is the Son of God and was incarnate (1 Jn 4:1-3). So then Evangelical Complementarians and Evangelical Egalitarians are having an in-house debate. I have great respect for Evangelical Complementarians who seek to live by Scripture. They have an equally high view of Scripture to my own. We are both committed to responsible exegesis. Formally speaking, we are agreed on the authority of the text but materially speaking, disagree as to its meaning in places and its present day significance for women's ministry.

Also since in my view the question is one of order and not faith and morals to raise the further question about whether to allow women to teach men is a slippery slope which will allow practicing gays to minister in the church is a red herring. For example, there is no debate that women in the NT ministered and exercised gifts. The issue is the scope of that ministry. However, there are no positive texts in Scripture concerning same sex sexual activity, quite the opposite.

A Final Word

I have offered some things to bear in mind in making a decision about the propriety of women preaching to men. I have suggested seven considerations that I believe need to be taken seriously.

So then those who argue against women preaching to mixed congregations need to ask where does the ultimate authority come from and where is it to be found. They also need to be cautious in how they employ the doctrine of the Trinity to make their point. It is so easy to go beyond what is written in the bad sense of the world (i.e., in an unwarranted way). They need too to be careful that Christ's headship of the church is not obscured by their arguments. Further they need to reckon with the invention of the printing press.

On my view women may indeed teach men the Bible. Godliness and giftedness are the keys not one's sex. Furthermore if I am right then one of the arguments against the ordination of a woman to congregational leadership falls to the ground; namely, that the congregational leader is to teach both men and women the faith, therefore if Scripture forbids a woman doing that then ipso facto she is likewise excluded from congregational leadership.

As for women preachers—do preach to us from the Scriptures, rather than like one of Francis Bacon's spiders spin your ideas out of your own heads as it were. That way like the Bereans we in the pew can check out whether what you say is a message from God, grounded in the revelation from God. Come to think of it there are more than a few male preachers who need to do the same.

¹ Their reasoning is along these lines. Trinity is not open to all believers but only those who meet certain academic prerequisites, unlike a church. The doors of Trinity are not open all year, unlike a church. The faculty student relationship is different to that of a pastor and flock. Faculty sits in academic judgement on students. This is not true of a church. Trinity is not a church but a task force of the people of God: a sodality and not a modality.

² "Essential Trinity" refers to the Trinity in internal and eternal inter-relation as Father, Son and Holy

Spirit without any reference to the Trinity acting to create or redeem.

³ Sometimes Karl Rahner's Rule is invoked to support this argument; namely, that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. Rahner's Rule is important in defeating modalistic monarchianism by accenting that it is the same God ad intra and ad extra as far as identity is concerned. But Rahner's Rule fails if it means that the economy is a window into the eternal order within the Trinity. For example, in Mark 1:14 the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness to meet the tempter. What eternal analogue answers to this? What eternal authority that the Spirit has over the Son answers to the way the Spirit directs Jesus' pre-Pentecost ministry as Israel's Messiah? Sinclair Ferguson sees the Spirit's executive role over Jesus as the messianic Son as so extensively testified to in the four Gospels that he writes of the "Lordship of the Spirit" prior to Pentecost, *The Holy Spirit*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996).

⁴ Carrie Sandom, *Fellow Workers In Christ* (September 2002, no publication details), p. 35. I have shortened the title.

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1995). The Trinity in "modes of operation" is also referred to as the "Economic Trinity." That is to say, the Trinity operating in creation and in the plan of salvation.

⁶ Indeed, a qualification of an elder or deacon was the capacity to manage their households well. Since households were much larger social units than our modern nuclear families what was being called for was managerial skill (cf. 1Timothy 3:4-5; 12; 14-15).

⁷ In *The Proceedings Of The Conference On Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Broadmans, 1988), pp. 114-115. My own view is that so much of what we take to be biblical piety and hence evangelical piety actually presupposes the printing press (for example, every one of us having the opportunity each day to read a portion of the Bible by ourselves). But that is another story.

⁸ I first came across the analogical argument in the mid 1980s in works by Walter Kaiser Jr. and Kenneth Kantzer. Both at one time or another were Deans of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where I now teach. Ironically I came across their views in the early 1980s when researching a paper for a Moore College Theological Conference paper and found myself eventually walking a different path to that of most of my colleagues on the matter.

⁹ I say "Genesis 4" because there may well be a connection in Paul's mind between Eve safely bearing children after the fall and its relevance to the false teaching at Ephesus, which included the forbidding of marriage (cf. Gen. 3:16; 4: 1-2; 2:15 a most difficult verse to interpret; 4:1-4). If I am right and Paul is operating narratively with the false teachers in mind as background, 1Timothy 2:15 starts to make more sense.

10 As a reading strategy I have observed that Complementarians tend to view 1 Timothy 2:11-15 through the prism of: "Adam was formed first" whereas Egalitarians view the text through the prism of the deception of Eve as I have done and relate "Adam was formed first" to that idea and not the other way around. The best Complementarian arguments are valid in the sense that that all the elements hang together logically if you understand the texts (Gen 2-3, 1 Cor 11:3, 1 Tim 2:11-15) a certain way and adopt as a theological idea that the Son is eternally subject to the Father. However if you don't then the argument is deemed unsound. The eternal subordination of the Son is one such problematical element for me. A sound argument is not only valid but the steps are deemed truth bearing and therefore the whole is sound.

11 I am also with qualifications attracted to one of the positions mentioned by William D. Mounce (*Word Biblical Commentary 46 Pastorals*), although not his own one, which argues that the "man" of 1 Timothy 2:12 is the elder who knows and teaches the gospel (cf. 1 Tim 3: 2 and Titus 1:9). I would broaden "man" though to include Paul and Timothy. On this view, Paul simply says "man" so as not to have to give all the qualifications: "I mean myself as an apostle and I also mean Timothy and I also mean the elders he appoints." The question could be asked as to why then Timothy is only to appoint male elders. My guess is that no women at the time were heads of households at Ephesus. By 2 Timothy 4:19, however, we know that Prisca (and Aquila) had come to reside there.

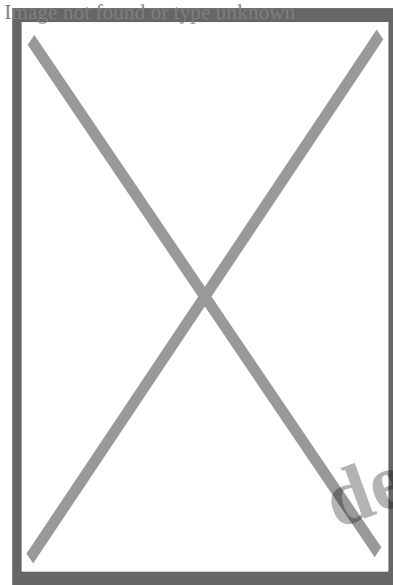
12 If Paul was presenting a transoccasional argument simpliciter then he could have made it stronger (contra my Complementarian friend) by explicitly appealing to male headship and/or to the rights of Adam as firstborn (primogeniture). For example Paul could have written: "For Adam was formed first" and left it at that since "first" analytically contains all that is necessary on this view or "For Adam was created the firstborn etc." or "For Adam was Eve's head etc." Then the 1 Timothy 2:13-14 text could be more easily linked to 1 Corinthians 11:3 – albeit understood as referring to the essential Trinity – and thence to Genesis 2-3. But Paul does not. On my view Paul's prohibition is occasional rather than transoccasional. I prefer the distinction between occasional and transoccasional in the context of this debate as it is less question begging than the usual one of transcultural and cultural.

13 With regard to elders, too often the description of elders (and deacons) is appealed to as the key to describing pastors today. However, none of Paul's churches seem to have been a stand alone one. They were part of the Pauline mission circle with concentric circles of authority radiating out from Christ to Paul through delegates like Timothy and others to elders appointed by Paul or his delegates. I believe the New Testament teaching elder had far less authority than we often think.

14 "Primitivism" is a technical term for "a religious outlook in Christianity in which one tries to recapture the spirit, thought, and practices of the early church" see Clarence L. Bence, "A Response To Luke L. Keefer," http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/16-20/19-04.htm accessed 5/21/2006. As I am using the term I have in mind what is more precisely termed "ecclesiastical primitivism" which deals with the organization of church life. In fact, the patterns of NT church life do not seem to have been monochrome. Within the Pauline churches 1 Corinthians presents no mention of elders, Titus does but not deacons and 1 Timothy speaks of elders and deacons. Jerusalem based Christianity seems to have developed differently again under the presidency of James. Which pattern is the normative one?

[15](#) What about 1 Corinthians 11 and women praying? The answer given was that 1 Corinthians belongs to the early development of church life whereas 1 Timothy belongs to the final picture of church life (order had replaced charismata).

[16](#) Those who adhere to the Regulative Principle (classically Presbyterian) argue that the distinction is a false one. God has given us all we need in Scripture for faith, morals and church order. On this view 1 Timothy is not so much an ad hoc epistle addressing problems raised by false teachers and teaching as a definitive manual of church order. The false teaching problem, however, pervades the epistle (cf. 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-5; 6:2-5, 20).



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27.07.2008

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