

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Timothy 2:1-15 *"Pleasing God"*

We've come to what may be the most difficult chapter in all of Paul's letters - one that makes us ask "What in the world is he talking about? And even if we could figure that out, how does it apply to any other church in any other place and time?" So we will start at "the shallow end," and see what we can make of it! The background, you will recall, is that Paul is writing to his "son in the faith" Timothy, with instructions on how as a church overseer Timothy is to deal with the "false teachers" who are disrupting the life and work of the church in the city of Ephesus.

Paul knew the city: he and Timothy had been there more than once. At one point Paul stayed there two years preaching; he left when he was dragged into a riot over the way the Christian presence was starting to disrupt trade centered on the huge temple of Artemis, the Greek moon goddess. Years later, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus, reminding them that God is working out a plan to unite "all things in heaven and earth" under the rule of Jesus Christ; that he has reconciled man to God and Jew to Greek through the death of Jesus, and gives salvation by grace through faith in him. So believers should be united by their faith in the one true God, and not be divided by false teaching. Now, many years later, Paul writes to Timothy as overseer of the Ephesian church, telling him not to let

disruptive people distract the church from proclaiming the Gospel to "all men."

1) Prayer and Holy Living

"God wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth," says Paul. But false leaders are teaching myths and controversies that are causing chaos - "shipwreck to people's faiths," he calls it - and they must be restrained. So Timothy should call the men of the church to pray. They should unite in praying for everyone, especially their civic rulers (yes, that included the emperor Nero!) and their church leaders.

Their prayer, united and free of dissent or anger, should ask God to bring peace and tranquility to the church and the city so that the work of the Gospel can go on. This is not about Christians having a quiet life, but about creating social conditions in which the credibility and witness of the church will allow the Gospel to be heard. So as men stood with their hands lifted in prayer (the normal way of praying in Jewish synagogues and early Christian churches), they would do their part in advancing the Gospel, which pleases God.

But the women also have a part to play. This is where Paul's letter gets complicated, because we don't know exactly what the false teachers were teaching, and how the

women especially were disrupting the life of the church. Remember we are dealing here with a specific letter to Timothy in a particular church and time - Paul was not, despite what some interpreters down through the years have claimed, writing a "manual of church order" for all churches in all places at all times. The clues to the women's role in the Church in Ephesus are probably found in later parts of this letter: for example, that some, especially younger widows, were "idle gossips and busybodies... saying things they ought not to... overcome with sensuality... failing to support older members of their families... turning away to follow Satan" (5:11-15).

In this context, it is perhaps not so surprising that Paul says he would not allow the women to teach in the Ephesian church. That this cannot be a blanket prohibition of women in leadership and teaching roles is clear from his other letters and the narratives in the book of Acts. Starting from the way Jesus treated women, the early Christians emancipated women in ways that shocked the Jewish and Roman communities. Women were prime witnesses to the Resurrection; the Holy Spirit at Pentecost descended on both men and women and gifted them with prophesying. There were named female leaders in the Christian community: Phoebe, Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche, Priscilla, Junia. Paul takes women's public role in worship for granted when he requires women in the Corinthian church to cover their heads "when they are prophesying." Women are mentioned (Romans 16) as apostles (or perhaps messengers); as ministers/deacons; as co-laborers and fellow-workers. Priscilla in particular is noted as a teacher to Apollos in Ephesus (Acts 19).

So Paul cannot here be forbidding all women a role in church leadership and teaching. He must be responding to something in Ephesus - and it's not completely clear what. Some

interpreters think his forbidding women "having authority over men" (more literally "domineering") suggests that some women in Ephesus had usurped the role of the elders of the church, and that they were perhaps leaders in the "false teaching." Others argue that it's more likely from Paul's words that the women were the major victims of the false teachings. In either case, they should not be leading or teaching.

There are also hints of wanton behavior among the women - not just because younger widows in some cases were "overcome with sensual desires" (5:11) - but in Paul's instructions about women's dress and adornment. There are strong sexual overtones to the words he uses about "modesty, decency and propriety." It's hard to translate the issues of clothing, hairstyles and jewelry into another cultural setting, but the impression is of a group of women who are "acting wildly" and bringing the church into disrepute. There had probably been similar problems in Corinth, reflected in Paul's instructions to that church about hairstyles and coverings. In both cities, we may be seeing early signs of the 2nd century Gnostic disdain of marriage, child-bearing and parenting.

So if the main calling of the church - to advance the Gospel - is to be followed; men need to stop disputing, quarreling and anger, and pray for the peace and salvation of all; and the women are to behave and comport themselves as befits Christian women - which will include good deeds to the needy, care of children, and a quiet and submissive attitude in learning the true faith - submissive here not to their husbands but to the elders and leaders of the church.

That leaves - under the heading of "what was Paul talking about?" - the final sentence: "*But women will be saved through child-bearing, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with*

propriety." That statement has left exegetes and interpreters in disarray for 2000 years! (The preceding reference to Eve being deceived first does not help!). What is Paul saying?

The only interpreters who feel assured that *they* understand this are the ones who say, "Well, of course! That's what the ancient world thought of women – weak, sinful, leading men astray, unfit to lead, useful only for bearing children. Jewish women of course kept silence in synagogues, and so it was in the early church. So Paul is just a man of his time showing his true colors as a 1st century misogynist." Now that's easy to say, but I think we have already seen that approach is a serious misrepresentation of Paul, and the early Christians, and of Jesus - and if followed, leads to rejection of most of the Bible.

So leaving that kind of interpretation aside, what do we have? Some make the last sentence say "women will be kept safe through childbirth." But that makes *save* suddenly mean something it never means anywhere else in Paul's writings, where it always means "redeem from sin and give eternal life." Another suggested reading is "women will be saved by the Child-Bearing" - making this a reference to the birth of Christ. But that is so obscure as to make it impossible to believe it's what Paul meant or Timothy would understand! So that more or less leaves Paul saying: "despite some Ephesian women (following Eve's example) falling under Satanic influence and usurping male leadership, they too can be saved if they will revert to/continue in faith (which is how everyone is saved); in love, holiness with propriety, and in fulfilling their roles as Christian women - primarily in child-bearing." And although that may still sound a little strange to our ears, it is probably closer to what Paul meant.

2) *The Church Today*

So what does all this mean to us or to other Christians? (Please note you can really only answer that question if you first do the hard work of trying to figure out what Paul meant originally!).

Of course some Christian groups have taken these verses as proof-texts that women have no place in church leadership or teaching. But I suspect that this has as much to do with people's pre-existing views about church leadership as it does with biblical exegesis! I have found it helpful to think of views of church leadership – or ordained ministry, to use a later concept – as a spectrum that was already emerging in the late 1st century but has now widened considerably. At one end is *ministry conceived as a "charismatic gift"* – some people are given by the Holy Spirit gifts of teaching, government, discernment, healing, and so on. That was the way the very early church saw leadership, and the way (for example) Pentecostal groups do today.

At the other end of the spectrum is a view of *ministry and leadership as "an official office"* to which people are appointed by an authorized senior leader. That emerged strongly in the 2nd century, has often been called "apostolic succession" and is of course held today by hierarchical churches like the Orthodox, the Roman Catholic Church, and to a lesser degree by Episcopalians and others. And of course people like Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Reformed Churches, fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum!

What I find helpful about this "spectrum" is that it aids in understanding how churches along it react, for example, to the ordination of women. Pentecostals recognize Spirit-given gifts in anyone who has them, male or female, seminary-trained or not; they have been in the forefront in the past 150 years in putting women in leadership. Catholics see a

continuous line of authority stretching back to Peter, and then to Jesus, which is transmitted by laying on of hands and results in an authorized office-holder as a bishop, priest or deacon. These by definition must be male.

Episcopalians, at least in Europe and N. America, have embraced female leadership; so have Methodists and most Lutherans. Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Reformed are open to women leaders, consistent with their flat hierarchies and their emphasis on *authority coming from the Word and the Spirit* and not from office. (Ironically, I think groups that are now well out of place on the spectrum are the more conservative Baptists, which do not (or no longer) accept women in leadership - perhaps because Baptists are less "charismatic" than they were even 30 years ago, and more inclined to think that authority derives from their voting for their pastors and deacons?).

What about us? I'm happy to say that regarding women in leadership, the issue was settled in this church long ago - before I came here, in fact - and we have equal numbers of men and women Deacons, Readers in worship, and so on. (I could perhaps say that it would be great if there were equal numbers also in children's and youth work, or among the Trustees!). Women - pastors and lay people - have preached from this pulpit, and I will say personally that I would be happy to see that continue and even grow.

As for men praying more, and without dissent or anger; as for women paying attention to their appearance "with propriety," I will leave that to you and the Holy Spirit! But I will insist, with Paul to Timothy, that what matters most in a church, the central issue, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Focus a church on that, and other

issues fade into insignificance. What pleases God is that the Gospel of his Son is offered to "all people."

Let us pray...