

Women and Ministry: Does Scripture Contradict Itself?

Jon Ruthven, Ph.D.

It seems that the problem of women and ministry among Evangelicals these days reflects a tension, not only between Christian tradition and modern culture, but also between two NT passages which appear to be contradictory, *i.e.*, Gal 3:28 and 1 Tim 2:11ff. Honest people who believe in the authority of Scripture often shape the ministry of their churches by the weight they give one passage over another. But are we really confronted with a forced choice here? Despite the usual approach of choosing one passage as the key and then exegetically watering down the other, isn't there some way in which *both* passages can retain their integrity and force? On the one hand one's adequate doctrine of inspiration requires that Scripture will not ultimately contradict itself. On the other, we cannot dilute the power and meaning of either of our passages: they are both fairly clear and emphatic -- but seemingly leading us in opposite directions. Moreover, if one is a conservative on matters of Scripture, one can't simply appeal to the current cultural norms, either in Biblical times or today, for justification of Christian praxis. Many interpreters, particularly of 1 Tim 2, suggest that Paul is addressing a specific, historically limited situation that no longer applies to us, *e.g.*, that the Ephesian women associated religious leadership with the local pagan priestesses. Once one starts relativizing Scripture like this, then the finger is out of the dike: just about any command of the New Testament can be dismissed by appealing to an "exceptional practice" in the first century. On the other hand, our Christian practices simply can't drift with the trends of our modern culture. If there is no biblical standard, who do we follow these days? Radical feminism? The gay rights movement? The pedophilia rights movement? Where does it stop? No, I firmly believe that Christianity, even as the original apostles, cannot "go beyond what is written" (1 Cor 4:6). Despite all this, I would submit that we can resolve our dilemma while preserving the integrity of Scripture on the one hand, and on the other reconciling these commands (1 Tim 2:11ff) with other Scriptures (Gal 3:28; cf. Col 3:11 -- paraphrases of Joel 2:28?).

1 Timothy 2:11-15 -- Women Are Not Allowed Ministry Authority in Church The language of 1 Tim 2:11ff. is stark and clear: women are not to teach or to take authority over men. If teaching is basically telling someone what to do, then it involves authority over the ones taught. There is no way to tap dance around this command. All manner of qualifications and exemptions are applied to this passage. For example: unlike today, the "teachers" of that time were more domineering --inappropriate for women; women can teach other women, not men; they can teach kids; they can teach natives in foreign lands, they can prophesy via the Spirit, but not use the other gift, teaching, *etc.* But the message of 1 Timothy is undeniable: women are commanded not to teach in a church setting. So then, how can this argument apply canonically to all places at all times in the Church? The usual Evangelical concept of canon strongly suggests that we can't eliminate unpopular biblical commands by limiting them to unique situations in the New Testament era.

I believe the apparent contradiction between the Gal 3:28 and 1 Tim 2:11-15 passages can be solved if we recognize a temporal/developmental issue here: to the extent a body of believers exists in the age of the Spirit is the extent to which the gender [and other] distinctions become less significant. To the extent the body participates in this present created order (note, I didn't say "fallen" -- though that adds to the gravity -- no pun; OK, pun) is the extent to which the distinctions, and hierarchies, continue. The distinctions are exacerbated by a broken relationship with God (both in Eden and in Ephesus), resulting in a power struggle: the woman strives after power (Gen 3:16c), precipitating a tyrannical response from her husband, though she is compensated by the ultimate empowering ability to produce children.

The Appeal to the "Earthly Order" What is interesting here is that Paul's argument against women having "*authentain*" or teaching authority is based 100% on arguments from the "created, earthly order" -- the pre-messianic, pre-Spirit context: 1) Adam was "first" in creation, implying a kind of primogeniture -- the status of "firstborn" (though feminists say this story shows that Adam was only a "rough draft"!); 2) Paul seems to argue that the

woman was the weak link in the temptation and “was deceived,” becoming, apparently the open door for Adam’s fall. This primarily female, as opposed to male, weakness for being “deceived” is puzzling and has generated lots of ink from commentators and dismay from many women. Nonetheless, he does use this argument against women teaching. 3) Paul states rather clearly that a woman characteristically retains her salvation [not via teaching] but in raising children and remaining in faith, love, sanctification and sobriety. This restriction infuriates a lot of women today, and men, for that matter, who resent a woman’s role being limited to that of a baby machine. But the emphasis that is unique to women is an emphasis based on physical reproduction, a condition clearly tied to this “present age” and the present reality of gender-distinct human bodies. The Galatians passage seems to contradict these arguments at key points.

Galatians 3:26-29—Women Share Full Ministry Authority in Christ It seems that Gal 3:26-29 also uses some strong language *vis-a-vis* women. 1) “You are *all sons* (*huioi* - - not daughters, implying lesser status) of God through *faith* (not via gender or social status) in Christ Jesus.” Elsewhere Paul insists that a true descendent of the ideal Abraham is *not genetic* [or gender based], *but a matter of the heart*. Genetic distinctions are abrogated in Christ (Gal 3:29): “*all* are *heirs* according to the promise.” By contrast, in the biblical culture, women rarely inherited anything if her brothers were living. But the second argument actually takes this strange assertion a step higher. 2) This “son” status is really “first son” status as the metaphor is further developed: “Those baptized “have *clothed* [them]selves *with Christ*.” The clothing metaphor is one not only of receiving the Spirit of Christ, but just as importantly, as receptor of *prophetic authority for ministry*, *e.g.*, when Elijah passed his “mantle” to Elisha (2 Kg 2:9-15 *cf.* Lk 24:49). Acts 1:8 consciously echoes the Elijah/Elisha metaphor in the promise to be “‘*clothed*’ with power” -- a promise also to *women* in the 120 at Pentecost. The story of Joseph’s coat, making him the clan leader is echoed in Lk 15, where the father’s “cloak” put on the prodigal son was an amazing and explosive conveyance of primogeniture, wherein the prodigal son became the *first son!* It is this status *and authority* that is given to women in Gal 3:27-28. The next argument delineates the condition or time reference in

which women are to receive this authority. 3) Galatians 3:26-28 is a clear paraphrase of Joel 2:28/Acts 2:17-18, which to the Jewish mind was the entrance into the “*olam haba*” (the Age-to-Come) of the Spirit, which was to be inaugurated by the Messiah (“Christ Jesus”). In that age all would become filled with the Spirit, become prophets, and become “*as the angels*” -- no gender. The “in Christ” of Gal 3:26 is not talking only about a Protestant “salvation” for all genders and classes (“we are all ‘equal’ at the foot of the cross”), but, more immediately from the context, refers to prophetic ministry and authority for them as well. “Christ” is not simply Jesus’ last name, but the designation of the messianic bringer of the eschatological Spirit of prophecy. So to be “in Christ” is to be “in the state of the eschatological Spirit when ‘all Israel would become prophets’” according to Rabbinic thought at the time of Jesus (Num 11:29, echoed in 1 Cor 14:5 and Acts 2:17-18, *cf.* Isa 59:21).

Does God Contradict Himself? In this context, like Rom 13 and the civil order, hierarchies are offered as an interim system -- a *temporary compromise* -- for preserving order in society, anticipating the ideal condition “in Christ,” when no one is struggling to dominate, but rather to serve. The 1 Tim 2 passage reflects a regression within the church, or at least a polar tension, from the ideal of Gal 3:28/Joel 2:28ff. In this eschatological interpretive context, then *both sets of passages* (pro *and* con) *are true!* What remains is to discern, through biblical “wisdom,” how and when the passages apply. There seem to be situations in which God gives absolute-sounding laws and commands appropriate for the developmental level of the readers (as in the “created order” of the 1 Tim 2:11 context, rather than in the “Spirit-order” of Gal 2:26-28//Joel 2:28), sometimes looking to a time when the commands might be reversed, as in the case of sacrifices, divorce, revenge, *e.g.*, Mt 5. In the NT Jesus recognizes the “milk/meat” problem of the need to teach the student, not the lesson (“many things I would teach you, but”), wherein what is true for one state of spiritual development is no longer true, or at least will be dramatically adjusted, for a more advanced stage. For example, I may say to my 3 year old: “Never cross the street!” But to a 10 year old, “Watch out for traffic before you cross the street.” Or to a 18 year old, “Go to the

store (several streets away) and get some groceries (no instructions on safety are given).” Certainly the issue of applying Scripture to one’s situation represents the temptation of Jesus (Mt 4; Lk 4), which was to pre- or misapply the rules of scripture without using biblical “wisdom,” *i.e.*, *faith*, that is, divine revelatory confirmation, as to their proper application. Is something like this going on within the NT regarding varying levels of maturity in relations between the sexes and other human classifications? Canonically, this rule (and its relevant passage) applies historically and geographically to churches who may have ranged from “milk” level to “meat” level of spiritual development. We all, of course, live in *both* ages: this age and the one to come (“upon whom the end of the ages has come”). The Corinthian women and men had to learn about living in both ages in tension: one could not live in the flesh and expect to operate as though one were already completely in the age to come. Certain developmental stages needed to be realized first: the kingdom is characterized not by power positions, but by servant positions; not by exclusivity, but by “receiving the little [undesirable] ones.” In this context struggles for power -- a characteristic of the fallen state - - are superseded by struggles to build up the body (the ideal of the “one flesh” in Gen 1:27 & 2:7, 23), in which, when one is exalted -- even women -- all rejoice! Instead of worrying about who’s boss (a self-destructive, “earth-bound” response to insecurity, *e.g.*, by the abused women of radical feminism as well as tradition-bound Fundamentalist men), the Christian relinquishes that worry because of the underlying empowerment of the Spirit. A secure person is not concerned about power and position, but rather is concerned about Christ’s mission: to see to it that *others* grow, prosper and be empowered. Hence, “equality” of the sexes, or any other classes, for that matter, is a non-biblical concept. “Equality” presupposes conflict and competition for power. Equality is a political compromise between two or more suspicious and wary combatants. By contrast, the NT does not espouse “equality,” but rather, “unity”: we are not “equal” in Christ Jesus, but “one.” The Christian has relinquished claims of “equality,” choosing rather to become a servant to others: to see them built up and empowered first, being secure in the knowledge that it is God who provides one’s security. Bottom line? I

believe the biblical rule is this: “To the extent that a local church is ‘in the Spirit’ is the extent to which all human barriers become increasingly irrelevant as to *who* expresses the Spirit’s leading -- since there is a common acknowledgement that *the Spirit* is ministering (Gal 3:28). On the other hand, to the extent to which a local church remains in the ‘created order’ (to which Paul appeals in 2 Tm 2), then the *interim solution* to power struggles of the ‘present age’ apply, *i.e.*, *a hierarchical chain of command*, much as the ‘powers that be’ (also ordained by God in Rom 13 and 1 Tm 2:1-3) very imperfectly regulate society to avoid an even worse outcome: chaos caused by unrestrained conflict. In practical terms, how does one confront the problem of moving toward the ideal state in Christ while living in this created order? The New Testament does not employ a Marxist-tainted model of violent class struggle against injustice, thereby opening Christians to the charge of supporting the repressive status quo. Rather the Scripture urges the believer to oppose injustice via love, intercessory prayer and sound teaching emphasizing the preservation of unity and relationship. Just as Paul instructed Philemon to treat his runaway slave, Onesimus “as a brother,” that is, to invoke the biblical tradition of the “kinsman redeemer” to buy back his slave’s freedom, so the New Testament appeals to the ideal of all believers (including women) in Christ sharing authority as “first-born” sons, and behaving accordingly. Nevertheless, in this “time between the times,” just as slaves continue to serve their masters as unto the Lord, so it may be that women may be called to serve in a fallen, created order, appealing to the justice and power of God, but without recourse to the unity-destroying, fleshly power struggles of this present age. It is easy to imitate the win-at-all-cost, tunnel-vision, professional injustice collectors whose approach tribalizes and fragments our societies. By the modern standard, the Christian approach of meekness does not sound fair, but then, the crucifixion was not fair. This method was, however, God’s way of demonstrating His power and vindication to the world.

