

Women and Proclamation: Understanding 1 Timothy 2:8-15

Amity L. Rees
PAST 5110
Dr. MA Hawkins
October 19, 2009

“The possibility for proclamation is . . . itself configured as a way of being Christian, involving the realities in which Christians live. Proclamation is nothing more, and certainly nothing less, than reordering, heralding, and reforming . . . not an observation of past events, but a herald of future ways, ways that challenge and change the present.”¹

In Matthew 28:20, Jesus instructs his disciples to “go into all the world and preach the gospel,” calling his followers to proclaim the Good News in all places, in all circumstances, and in all realities. As pointed out in the excerpt above, such proclamation is not rooted in priestly ordinance but in prophetic call. To proclaim is to be a disciple, to fulfill the essential element of Christian faith. Therefore, to deny a woman the ability to proclaim is not only a matter of injustice, but also robs her of her very discipleship, for if she cannot proclaim, she cannot fulfill the Great Commission.

Hermeneutic

The message of freedom and egalitarianism is deeply embedded in the Gospel. From the stories of creation, exodus, and exile to Christ and the Church, the scriptures attest to freedom.² The underlying theme of freedom for peoples as proclaimed in the whole scripture is the standard to which we measure our hermeneutic. If a single passage is not consistent with the overarching message of freedom, then there is exegetical work that must be done to accurately uncover the meaning of the passage. Therefore to base a

¹ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, and God* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 58-59.

² *Ibid.*, 71.

theology on a single passage of scripture is not only inaccurate, but is disloyal to the beauty and integrity of scripture as a whole.

In handling the question of women in ministry, the prophetic egalitarian movement in the Church proves more consistent with the message of freedom in the whole of scripture. From Miriam to Deborah, from Mary of Magdela to Prisca and Junia, we find strong evidence of women involved in proclamation of Gospel. An egalitarian practice that stands outside of the realm of culture exists within the Kingdom of God as recorded within the whole of scripture.

In approaching a problematic text such as 1 Timothy 2:8-15, it is important to compare the message that is presented in our translated scriptures with this overarching example. Observing inconsistency, we begin to move below the surface to uncover the reality of this passage, allowing us to understand it as not a prohibitive mandate to women but a specific message for a unique situation that existed in the Church at Ephesus during the latter part of Paul's life. Paul is not contradicting his earlier statements of egalitarianism (ex. Gal. 3:28), but is giving Timothy instruction for the Ephesian church in combating heretical teaching and ungodly attitudes.

The Church in Ephesus

Ephesus existed as a great, opulent city, and the inscription upon the gate read, "THE FIRST AND GREATEST CITY OF ASIA." Home to the temple of Diana, a marvelous wonder of the

ancient world, one of the city's most prominent positions was that of the *Neokoros*, or temple keeper, of Diana.³

The church in Ephesus was not immune to such cultural influence. The practice and theology of mystery religion made its impression on the teaching of the local church. Proto-Gnostic heresies found their way into doctrine. This "superior wisdom,"⁴ encouraged dietary restrictions, abstinence from marriage and childbearing, and worship of Eve as goddess.⁵ The stories of creation in Genesis found new interpretation from old mystery traditions, asserting that the resurrection had already taken place.⁶ Therefore, the worshipper would participate in the resurrection by emulating Genesis 1 and 2 by abstaining from marriage, childbearing, and meat.⁷

Such teaching held particular influence over female converts in Ephesus, and many participated in seduction and polygamy as they had previously been accustomed.⁸ Ephesian woman began to usurp authority from male leaders, demanding prominence as an expression of freedom in Christ. Such activity was not only contrary to the Gospel, but was disruptive to the social order of worship in the church.⁹

Prisca

In dealing with the context of Ephesus and the role of women in leadership, we must approach the role of Prisca in both her ministry within the church and her support of Paul's

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters of Timothy*, vol. 35A of *The Anchor Bible* (New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 2001), 142.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (New York, NY: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2000), lxxii.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

work. Paul commended Prisca and Aquilla for their labor in the Gospel. The couple served as pastors and missionaries in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome.¹⁰ Prisca served as a patron and benefactor for Paul (I Cor 15:32), and her work included teaching, preaching, presiding over the church, and offering patronage to other believers.¹¹ Given her important role within the apostolic work of the church, and especially her patron support to Paul himself, it would be outrageous for Paul to write her former church order to present a doctrinal statement that forbade women to proclaim the Gospel. Such disrespect would have been completely unacceptable in a patron society.

The Passage

Given the circumstances unique to Ephesus, and the history of Prisca's involvement, we may infer more deeply the intent of the passage in 1 Timothy 2. I offer my personal translation work from the Kione Greek text of 1 Timothy 2:8-15, which indicates further ambiguity of Paul's instruction:

I wish, therefore, the men to pray in every place, lifting holy and pure hands, apart from vengeance and dispute. Likewise, also women (to be) in discreet apparel with reverence and sobriety, to adorn themselves not in broided hair and gold or pearls or expensive clothing, but for any woman to become godly (or "to proclaim godliness") through good works. A woman ought to learn in quietness (stillness, silence) in all submissiveness. And I am not permitting a woman to teach nor usurp a man's authority, but to be in stillness. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived (with false statements), but the woman was deceived (as in cheated, beguiled) and had come into transgression. She will be saved (or healed) through maternal duties (or childbearing) if they remain in faith and love and holiness and sobriety.

¹⁰ Carol Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 136-137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

In the context of the situation in Ephesus, it is clear that Paul is instructing Timothy to place boundaries around the women in that particular local congregation. Rather than decorating their bodies in a fashion that indicates sexuality and opulence, the women are to concern themselves with learning the Gospel and becoming disciples.

The present tense “I am not permitting” is translated as such because the statement does not coincide Paul’s egalitarian doctrine, and therefore cannot be an overarching “I do not permit.” Here, the present tense is more punctiliar, as Paul is not permitting the women at Ephesus at this time. Therefore, the statement does not negate any previous or subsequent affirmation of women proclaiming the Gospel.

Finally, the example of Adam and Eve are used to correct the misreading of Genesis creation accounts as indicative of goddess worship or transcended resurrection, and to serve as framework for the problem at hand. Paul’s brief description here is understood as a framework in which to describe the theological underpinnings of the problems at Ephesus. Adam was not “deceived with false statements,” but had full knowledge of his sin, and Eve fell into sin through deception, being “cheated” by falsehood. Therefore the women at Ephesus will be healed through maternal duties, not in abstaining from marriage and childbirth, but in responsible sexual and reproductive practice, given that they remain faithful to discipleship in Christ.

In light of strong exegesis, it is clear that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 does not prohibit proclamation from women, nor does it serve as an oppressive text. In fact, this passage in its underpinnings is another egalitarian message from Paul, demanding that no person rob another of their authority in Christ, but that proclamation of the Gospel is done in truth with dignity. Women in scripture receive full liberation as promised by Christ, as

expressed in Paul's clearly doctrinal statement, "there is neither . . . male nor female . . . for we are all one in Christ Jesus. In this new understanding of 1 Timothy 2:8-15, we find that it is consistent with the whole story of scripture, in liberation and empowerment of persons to proclaim, as instructed in Matthew 28:20, "to all the world . . . in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Works Cited

Chopp, Rebecca S. *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, and God*. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The First and Second Letters of Timothy*. Vol. 35A of *The Anchor Bible*. New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 2001.

Meyers, Carol, ed. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

Mounce, William D. *Pastoral Epistles*. Vol. 46 of *Word Biblical Commentary*. New York, NY: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2000.