

Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis

a conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church'
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by the Bishop of Durham, Dr. N. T. Wright

I am very grateful to the organisers for inviting me to address this important conference, and only sorry that because of other duties I have been unable to take any other part in your gathering. I come to you fresh from celebrating the 900th anniversary of the translation of the bones of St Cuthbert into the Cathedral across the street, and with a consequent sense both of our enormous indebtedness to generations long ago, not least to those who, like Cuthbert, were determined through lives of holiness, celebrating God's good creation and mourning over the human wickedness that defaces it and us with it, to strike a path through the ways of the world to the different way of God's kingdom. And I take it that, appropriately applied, this is roughly what this conference is seeking to do: to renounce the moulds into which the world around tries to squeeze us, and to embrace the different way which is the way of God's kingdom, in which, yet, we discover the fulfilment of God's created plan and order. It is in that spirit that I want to offer you some reflections which are, I fear, very far from complete or fully worked out. Today's topic has not been an area of primary research for me and many of you will know the secondary literature much better than I do. Nor is this going to be one of those complete trawls through all the relevant biblical texts. But there are one or two things I may be able to add, and indeed my reflections on 1 Timothy 2, which I shall save for towards the end, are the main reason I allowed myself to be persuaded to accept this invitation.

1. Introductory Remarks

First, some introductory remarks about the sort of debate that this conference reflects. I have read through some of your literature with great interest but with a sense of a definite cultural gap. It's clear to me the way CBE is addressing its particular questions comes from a very specific American context – specific not just in being American but in reflecting some particular American subcultures. I know a little about those subcultures – for instance, the battles over different editions of new biblical translations, some using inclusive language and others not – and I know how, in this as in many other things, you cannot simply transplant the American debates on to the British scene without some quite serious adjustments. As with reactions to Mel Gibson's movie, we simply very often see things differently. And in my own church the main problem about finding ways towards male/female equality in ministry comes, not so much from within the Evangelical right (though there is of course a significant element there), but from within the traditional Anglo-Catholic movement for whom scripture has never been the central point of the argument, and indeed is often ignored altogether. I do therefore want to counsel this conference to beware of simply transplanting a debate without recognising that the soil over here does different things to all kinds of plants.

Second, I do worry a bit about the word 'equality' and the language of 'egalitarian' and so on. I recognise what is being said of course, and if I didn't endorse that point I probably wouldn't be speaking here now; but those words carry so much freight in our various cultures that I do

wonder whether it's wise, whether it actually helps the cause you want to set forward, to highlight those terms in the way you do. Not only is the word a red rag to all kinds of bulls who perhaps don't need to be aggravated in that way (though some may); it is always in danger of being inaccurate, far too broad, implying to many (wrongly of course, but one cannot police what people will hear in technical terms) not only equality but *identity*. Likewise, to use the word 'complementary' and its cognates to denote a position which says that not only are men and women different but that those differences mean that women cannot exercise ministry, or some kinds of ministry, within the church, is I think a shame; as I shall suggest, I think the word 'complementary' is too good and important a word to let that side of the argument have it all to themselves.

I recognise, then, as we all must, that this debate takes place within the wider cultural context of multiple overlapping and interlocking debates, for which the many varieties of feminism on the one hand and the ongoing modern/postmodern culture wars on the other provide two of many signposts. Part of the problem, particularly in the United States, is that cultures become so polarized that it is often assumed that if you tick one box you're going to tick a dozen other boxes down the same side of the page – without realising that the page itself is highly arbitrary and culture-bound. We have to claim the freedom, in Christ and in our various cultures, to name and call issues one by one with wisdom and clarity, without assuming that a decision on one point commits us to a decision on others. I suspect, in fact, that part of the presenting problem which has generated CBE is precisely the assumption among many American evangelicals that you have to buy an entire package or you're being disloyal, and that you exist because you want to say that on this issue, and perhaps on many others too (gun control? Iraq?), the standard hard right line has allowed itself to be conned into a sub-Christian or even unChristian stance. Anyway, enough of that; I just wanted to flag up the contexts within which you and I are talking, and warn against any kind of absolutism in our particular positions.

I have been asked to speak, not about the relation between the sexes in general, nor indeed about marriage, but about the ministry of women. That is a welcome limitation of my subject, and I'm going to limit it further, but I do want to set my remarks within a particular framework of biblical theology to do with Genesis 1. Many people have said, and I have often enough said it myself, that the creation of man and woman in their two genders is a vital part of what it means that humans are created in God's image. I now regard that as a mistake. After all, not only the animal kingdom, as noted in Genesis itself, but also the plant kingdom, as noted by the reference to seed, have their male and female. The two-gender factor is not at all specific to human beings, but runs right through a fair amount of the rest of creation. This doesn't mean it's unimportant, indeed it means if anything it's all the more important; being male and being female, and working out what that means, is something most of creation is called to do and be, and unless we are to collapse into a kind of gnosticism, where the way things are in creation is regarded as secondary and shabby over against what we are now to do with it, we have to recognise, respect and respond to this call of God to live in the world he has made and as the people he has made us. It's just that we can't use the argument that being male-plus-female is somehow what being God's imagebearers actually means.

This brings us nicely to the text which you have yourselves made central to your own movement, Galatians 3.28, and the first exegetical section of this paper is going to offer some reflections on

it.

2. Galatians 3.28

The first thing to say is fairly obvious but needs saying anyway. Galatians 3 is not about ministry. Nor is it the only word Paul says about being male and female, and instead of taking texts in a vacuum and then arranging them in a hierarchy, for instance by quoting this verse and then saying that it trumps every other verse in a kind of fight to be the senior bull in the herd (what a very masculine way of approaching exegesis, by the way!), we need to do justice to what Paul is actually saying at this point. I am surprised to see, in some of your literature, the insistence that women and men are equally saved and justified; that is, I'm surprised because I've never heard anyone denying it. Of course, there may well be some who do, but I just haven't met them. The point Paul is making overall in this passage is that God has one family, not two, and that this family consists of all those who believe in Jesus; that this is the family God promised to Abraham, and that nothing in the Torah can stand in the way of this unity which is now revealed through the faithfulness of the Messiah. This is not at all about how we relate to one another within this single family; it is about the fact, as we often say, that the ground is even at the foot of the cross.

First, a note about translation and exegesis. I notice that on one of your leaflets you adopt what is actually a mistranslation of this verse: neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female. That is precisely what Paul does *not* say; and as it's what we expect he's going to say, we should note quite carefully what he has said instead, since he presumably means to make a point by doing so, a point which is missed when the translation is flattened out as in that version. What he says is that there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, *no 'male and female'*. I think the reason he says 'no male and female' rather than 'neither male nor female' is that he is actually quoting Genesis 1, and that we should understand the phrase 'male and female' in scare-quotes.

So does Paul mean that in Christ the created order itself is undone? Is he saying, as some have suggested, that we go back to a kind of chaos in which no orders of creation apply any longer? Or is he saying that we go on, like the gnostics, from the first rather shabby creation in which silly things like gender-differentiation apply to a new world in which we can all live as hermaphrodites – which, again, some have suggested, and which has interesting possible ethical spin-offs? No. Paul is a theologian of new creation, and it is always the renewal and reaffirmation of the existing creation, never its denial, as not only Galatians 6.16 but also of course Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15 make so very clear. Indeed, Genesis 1—3 remains enormously important for Paul throughout his writings.

What then is he saying? Remember that he is controverting in particular those who wanted to enforce Jewish regulations, and indeed Jewish ethnicity, upon Gentile converts. Remember the synagogue prayer in which the man who prays thanks God that he has not made him a Gentile, a slave or a woman – at which point the women in the congregation that God 'that you have made me according to your will'. I think Paul is deliberately marking out the family of Abraham reformed in the Messiah as a people who cannot pray that prayer, since within this family these distinctions are now irrelevant.

I think there is more. Remember that the presenting issue in Galatians is circumcision, male circumcision of course. We sometimes think of circumcision as a painful obstacle for converts, as indeed in some ways it was; but of course for those who embraced it it was a matter of pride and privilege. It not only marked out Jews from Gentiles; it marked them out in a way which automatically privileged males. By contrast, imagine the thrill of equality brought about by baptism, the identical rite for Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. And that's not all. Though this is somewhat more speculative, the story of Abraham's family did of course privilege the male line of descent: Isaac, Jacob and so on. What we find in Paul, both in Galatians 4 and in Romans 9, is careful attention being paid – rather like Matthew 1, in fact, though from a different angle – to the women in the story. If those in Christ are the true family of Abraham, which is the point of the whole story, then the manner of this identity and unity takes a quantum leap beyond the way in which first-century Judaism construed them, bringing male and female together as surely and as equally as Jew and Gentile. What Paul seems to be doing in this passage, then, is ruling out any attempt to back up the continuing male privilege in the structuring and demarcating of Abraham's family by an appeal to Genesis 1, as though someone were to say, 'But of course the male line is what matters, and of course male circumcision is what counts, because God made male and female.' No, says Paul, none of that counts when it comes to membership in the renewed people of Abraham.

But once we have grasped this point we must take a step back and reflect on what Paul has not done as well as what he has done. In regard to the Jew/Gentile distinction, Paul's fierce and uncompromising insistence on equality in Christ does not at all mean that we need pay no attention to the distinctives between those of different cultural backgrounds when it comes to living together in the church. Romans 14 and 15 are the best example of this, but we can see it as well throughout Galatians itself, as Paul regularly speaks of 'we' meaning Jewish Christians and 'you' or 'they' meaning Gentile Christians. They have come to an identical destination but they have come by very different routes and retain very different cultural memories and imaginations. The differences between them are not obliterated, and pastoral practice needs to take note of this; they are merely irrelevant when it comes to belonging to Abraham's family. And this applies, I suggest, *mutatis mutandis*, to Paul's treatment of men and women within the Christian family. The difference is irrelevant for membership status and membership badges. But it is still to be taken note of when it comes to pastoral practice. We do not become hermaphrodites or for that matter genderless, sexless beings when we are baptised. Paul would have been the first to reject the gnostic suggestion that the original creation was a secondary, poor shot at making a world and that we have to discover ways of transcending that which, according to Genesis 1, God called 'very good'. This is the point at which we must issue a warning against the current fashion in some quarters, in America at least, for documents like the so-called 'Gospel of Mary', read both in a gnostic and a feminist light. That kind of option appears to present a short-cut right in to a pro-women agenda, but it not only purchases that at a huge cost, historically and theologically, but also presents a very two-edged blessing, granted the propensity in some branches of ancient gnosticism to flatten out the male/female distinction, not by affirming both as equally important, but by effectively turning women into men. Remember the last saying in the so-called 'Gospel of Thomas'.

The ways in which Paul explores the differences between men and women come elsewhere than

in Galatians, of course. I want to look first at 1 Corinthians and then, finally, at 1 Timothy; but, before we do either, I want to offer you some notes on one or two themes and passages in the gospels and Acts.

3. Gospels and Acts

Among the many things that need to be said about the gospels is that we gain nothing by ignoring the fact that Jesus chose twelve male apostles. There were no doubt all kinds of reasons for this within both the symbolic world in which he was operating and the practical and cultural world within which they would have to live and work. But every time this point is made – and in my experience it is made quite frequently – we have to comment on how interesting it is that there comes a time in the story when the disciples all forsake Jesus and run away; and at that point, long before the rehabilitation of Peter and the others, it is the women who come first to the tomb, who are the first to see the risen Jesus, and are the first to be entrusted with the news that he has been raised from the dead. This is of incalculable significance. Mary Magdalene and the others are the apostles to the apostles. We should not be surprised that Paul calls a woman named Junia an apostle in Romans 16.7. If an apostle is a witness to the resurrection, there were women who deserved that title before any of the men. (I note that there was a huge fuss in the translation and revision of the New International Version at the suggestion that Junia was a woman, and that not a single historical or exegetical argument was available to those who kept insisting, for obvious reasons, that she was Junias, a man.)

Nor is this promotion of women a totally new thing with the resurrection. As in so many other ways, what happened then picked up hints and pinpoints from earlier in Jesus' public career. I think in particular of the woman who anointed Jesus (without here going in to the question of who it was and whether it happened more than once); as some have pointed out, this was a priestly action which Jesus accepted as such. And I think, too, of the remarkable story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. Most of us grew up with the line that Martha was the active type and Mary the passive or contemplative type, and that Jesus is simply affirming the importance of both and even the priority of devotion to him. That devotion is undoubtedly part of the importance of the story, but far more obvious to any first-century reader, and to many readers in Turkey, the Middle East and many other parts of the world to this day would be the fact that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet *within the male part of the house* rather than being kept in the back rooms with the other women. This, I am pretty sure, is what really bothered Martha; no doubt she was cross at being left to do all the work, but the real problem behind that was that Mary had cut clean across one of the most basic social conventions. It is as though, in today's world, you were to invite me to stay in your house and, when it came to bedtime, I were to put up a camp bed in your bedroom. We have our own clear but unstated rules about whose space is which; so did they. And Mary has just flouted them. *And Jesus declares that she is right to do so.* She is 'sitting at his feet'; a phrase which doesn't mean what it would mean today, the adoring student gazing up in admiration and love at the wonderful teacher. As is clear from the use of the phrase elsewhere in the NT (for instance, Paul with Gamaliel), to sit at the teacher's feet is a way of saying you are being a *student*, picking up the teacher's wisdom and learning; and in that very practical world you wouldn't do this just for the sake of informing your own mind and heart, but in order to be a teacher, a rabbi, yourself. Like much in the gospels, this story is left cryptic as far as we at least are concerned, but I doubt if any first-century reader would have missed the point.

That, no doubt, is part at least of the reason why we find so many women in positions of leadership, initiative and responsibility in the early church; I used to think Romans 16 was the most boring chapter in the letter, and now, as I study the names and think about them, I am struck by how powerfully they indicate the way in which the teaching both of Jesus and of Paul was being worked out in practice.

One other point, about Acts, something among many others that I gleaned from Ken Bailey on the basis of his long experience of working in the Middle East. It's interesting that at the crucifixion the women were able to come and go and see what was happening without fear from the authorities. They were not regarded as a threat, and did not expect to be so regarded. Bailey points out that this pattern is repeated to this day in the Middle East; at the height of the troubles in Lebanon, when men on all sides in the factional fighting were either hiding or going about with great caution, the women were free to come and go, to do the shopping, to take children out, and so on. (I think this tells us something as well about the age of the Beloved Disciple, but that's another story.) But it's then fascinating, by contrast, that when we turn to Acts, and the persecution that arose against the church not least at the time of Stephen, we find that women are being targeted equally alongside the men. Saul of Tarsus was going to Damascus to catch women and men alike and haul them off into prison. Bailey points out on the basis of his cultural parallels that this only makes sense if the women, too, are seen as leaders, influential figures within the community.

But, having mentioned Paul's abortive attempts to catch Christians in Damascus, it's now high time to return to his mature thought and look at the three key passages which have often caused difficulty.

4. 1 Corinthians

There has been an enormous amount of work done recently on the social and cultural context of 1 Corinthians, not least by Bruce Winter in Cambridge, and I want to urge all those who are interested in finding out what Paul actually said and meant to study such work with great care. I don't have time or skill to go into details; but there are many things about first-century classical life which shed a great deal of light on the actual issues which Paul is addressing and they need to be taken carefully into account.

I want instead to home in at once on one of the two passages which has caused so much difficulty, the verses at the end of 1 Corinthians 14 in which Paul insists that women must keep silent in church. I am in two minds whether to agree with those who say this verse is a later and non-Pauline interpolation. One of the finest textual critics of our day, Gordon Fee, has argued very strongly that it is, purely on the grounds of the way the manuscript tradition unfolds. I urge you to examine his arguments and make up your own minds. But I have always been attracted, ever since I heard it, to the explanation offered once more by Ken Bailey. In the Middle East, he says, it was taken for granted that men and women would sit apart in church, as still happens today in some circles. Equally important, the service would be held (in Lebanon, say, or Syria, or Egypt), in formal or classical Arabic, which the men would all know but which many of the women would not, since the women would only speak a local dialect or patois. Again, we may disapprove of such an arrangement, but one of the things you learn in real pastoral work as

opposed to ivory-tower academic theorizing is that you simply can't take a community all the way from where it currently is to where you would ideally like it to be in a single flying leap. Anyway, the result would be that during the sermon in particular, the women, not understanding what was going on, would begin to get bored and talk among themselves. As Bailey describes the scene in such a church, the level of talking from the women's side would steadily rise in volume, until the minister would have to say loudly, 'Will the women please be quiet!', whereupon the talking would die down, but only for a few minutes. Then, at some point, the minister would again have to ask the women to be quiet; and he would often add that if they wanted to know what was being said, they should ask their husbands to explain it to them when they got home. I know there are other explanations sometimes offered for this passage, some of them quite plausible; this is the one that has struck me for many years as having the strongest claim to provide a context for understanding what Paul is saying. After all, his central concern in 1 Corinthians 14 is for order and decency in the church's worship. This would fit extremely well.

What the passage cannot possibly mean is that women had no part in leading public worship, speaking out loud of course as they did so. This is the positive point that is proved at once by the other relevant Corinthian passage, 1 Corinthians 11.2–11, since there Paul is giving instructions for how women are to be dressed while engaging in such activities, instructions which obviously wouldn't be necessary if they had been silent in church all the time. But that is the one thing we can be sure of. In this passage, almost everything else seems to me remarkably different to nail down. What I want to do now is to offer you the explanation I tried out in my little book on 1 Corinthians; in the two years since I wrote it, I haven't seen anything to make me change my mind, though as I say Bruce Winter's work needs to be factored in importantly into our understanding of the social context.

Paul wasn't, of course, addressing the social issues we know in our world. Visit a different culture, even today, and you will discover many subtle assumptions, pressures and constraints in society, some of which appear in the way people dress and wear their hair. In western culture, a man wouldn't go to a dinner party wearing a bathing suit, nor would a woman attend a beach picnic wearing a wedding dress. Most western churches have stopped putting pressure on women to wear hats in church (western-style hats, in any case, were not what Paul was writing about here), but nobody thinks it odd that we are still strict about men *not* wearing hats in church.

In Paul's day (as, in many ways, in ours), gender was marked by hair and clothing styles. We can tell from statues, vase paintings and other artwork of the period how this worked out in practice. There was social pressure to maintain appropriate distinctions. But did not Paul himself teach that there was 'no male and female, because you are all one in the Messiah?' (Galatians 3.28)? Perhaps, indeed, that was one of the 'traditions' that he had taught the Corinthian church, who needed to know that Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female were all equally welcome, equally valued, in the renewed people of God. Perhaps that had actually created the situation he is addressing here; perhaps some of the Corinthian women had been taking him literally, so that when they prayed or prophesied aloud in church meetings (which Paul assumes they will do regularly; this tells us, as we've seen, something about how to understand 14.34–35) they had decided to remove their normal headcovering, perhaps also unbraiding their hair, to show that in the Messiah they were free from the normal social conventions by which men and women were distinguished.

That's a lot of 'perhaps'es. We can only guess at the dynamics of the situation – which is of course what historians always do. It's just that here we are feeling our way in the dark more than usual. But, perhaps to the Corinthians' surprise, Paul doesn't congratulate the women on this new expression of freedom. He insists on maintaining gender differentiation during worship.

Another dimension to the problem may well be that in the Corinth of his day the only women who appeared in public without some kind of headcovering were prostitutes. This isn't suggested directly here, but it may have been in the back of his mind. If the watching world discovered that the Christians were having meetings where women 'let their hair down' in this fashion, it could have the same effect on their reputation as it would in the modern west if someone looked into a church and found the women all wearing bikinis.

The trouble is, of course, that Paul doesn't say exactly this, and we run the risk of 'explaining' him in terms that might (perhaps) make sense to us while ignoring what he himself says. It's tempting to do that, precisely because in today's western world we don't like the implications of the differentiation he maintains in verse 3: the Messiah is the 'head' of every man, a husband is the 'head' of every woman, and the 'head' of the Messiah is God. This seems to place man in a position of exactly that assumed superiority against which women have rebelled, often using Galatians 3.28 as their battle-cry.

But what does Paul mean by 'head'? He uses it here sometimes in a metaphorical sense, as in verse 3, and sometimes literally, as when he's talking about what to do with actual human heads (verses 4–7 and 10). But the word he uses can mean various different things; and a good case can be made out for saying that in verse 3 he is referring not to 'headship' in the sense of sovereignty, but to 'headship' in the sense of 'source', like the 'source' or 'head' of a river. In fact, in some of the key passages where he explains what he's saying (verses 8, 9 and 12a) he is referring explicitly to the creation story in Genesis 2, where woman was made from the side of man. I suspect, in fact, that this is quite a different use of the idea of 'headship' from that in Ephesians 5, where it relates of course to husband and wife and where a different point is being made. That doesn't mean Paul couldn't have written them both, only that he was freer than we sometimes imagine to modify his own metaphors according to various contexts.

The underlying point then seems to be that in worship it is important for both men and women to be their truly created selves, to honour God by being what they are and not blurring the lines by pretending to be something else. One of the unspoken clues to this passage may be Paul's assumption that in worship the creation is being restored, or perhaps that in worship we are anticipating its eventual restoration (15.27–28). God made humans male and female, and gave them 'authority' over the world, as Ben-Sirach 17.3 puts it, summarizing Genesis 1.26–28 and echoing Psalm 8.4–8 (Ben-Sirach was written around 200 BC). And if humans are to reclaim this authority over the world, this will come about as they worship the true God, as they pray and prophesy in his name, and are renewed in his image, in being what they were made to be, in celebrating the genders God has given them.

If this is Paul's meaning, the critical move he makes is to argue that a man dishonours his head by covering it in worship and that a woman dishonours hers by *not* covering it. He argues this

mainly from the basis that creation itself tends to give men shorter hair and women longer (verses 5–6, 13–15); the fact that some cultures, and some people, offer apparent exceptions would probably not have worried him. His main point is that in worship men should follow the dress and hair codes which proclaim them to be male, and women the codes which proclaim them to be female.

Why then does he say that a woman ‘must have authority on her head because of the angels’ (verse 10)? This is one of the most puzzling verses in a puzzling passage, but there is help of sorts in the Dead Sea Scrolls. There is it assumed that when God’s people meet for worship, the angels are there too (as many liturgies, and theologians, still affirm).

For the Scrolls, this means that the angels, being holy, must not be offended by any appearance of unholiness among the congregation. Paul shares the assumption, that the angels are worshipping along with the humans, but may be making a different point.

When humans are renewed in the Messiah and raised from the dead, they will be set in authority over the angels (6.3). In worship, the church anticipates how things are going to be in that new day. When a woman is praying or prophesying (perhaps in the language of angels, as in 13.1), she needs to be truly what she is, since it is to male and female alike, in their mutual interdependence as God’s image-bearing creatures, that the world, including the angels, is to be subject. God’s creation needs humans to be fully, gloriously and truly human, which means fully and truly male and female. This, and of course much else besides, is to be glimpsed in worship.

The Corinthians, then, may have drawn the wrong conclusion from the ‘tradition’ that Paul had taught them. Whether or not they could follow his argument any better than we can, it seems clear that his main aim was that the marks of difference between the sexes should not be set aside in worship. At least perhaps.

We face different issues, but making sure that our worship is ordered appropriately, to honour God’s creation and anticipate its fulfilment in the new creation, is still a priority. There is no ‘perhaps’ about that. When we apply this to the question of women’s ministry, it seems to me that we should certainly stress equality in the role of women but should be very careful about implying identity. This passage tells, for me at least, quite strongly on the side of those who see the ministry of women as significantly different to the ministry of men and therefore insists that we need both to be themselves, rather than for one to try to become a clone of the other.

All this points us on towards the final and of course the hardest passage of all, 1 Timothy 2.

5. 1 Timothy 2

I leave completely aside for today the question of who wrote 1 Timothy. It is more different from the rest of Paul than any of the other letters, including the other Pastorals and 2 Thessalonians. But I do not discount it for that reason; many of us write in many different styles according to occasion and audience, and though that doesn’t remove all the problems it ought to contextualize them. What matters, and matters vitally in a great many debates, is of course what the passage says. I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I suggest that it is this passage far and away above all

others which has been the sheet-anchor for those who want to deny women a place in the ordained ministry of the church, with full responsibilities for preaching, presiding at the Eucharist, and exercising leadership within congregations and indeed dioceses.

Once again the matter is of course very vexed and much fought over, and I have not read more than a fraction of the enormous literature that has been produced on the passage. I simply give my opinion for what it is worth. And once again I am drawing here on what I have said in my recent popular-level commentary on the passage. This time I acknowledge the help of another old friend, Christopher Bryan of the University of the South at Sewanee, whose sensitive work on the classical context is as always very stimulating.

When people say that the Bible enshrines patriarchal ideas and attitudes, this passage, particularly verse 12, is often held up as the prime example. Women mustn't be teachers, the verse seems to say; they mustn't hold any authority over men; they must keep silent. That, at least, is how many translations put it. This, as I say, is the main passage that people quote when they want to suggest that the New Testament forbids the ordination of women. I was once reading these verses in a church service and a woman near the front exploded in anger, to the consternation of the rest of the congregation (even though some agreed with her). The whole passage seems to be saying that women are second-class citizens at every level. They aren't even allowed to dress prettily. They are the daughters of Eve, and she was the original troublemaker. The best thing for them to do is to get on and have children, and to behave themselves and keep quiet.

Well, that's how most people read the passage in our culture until quite recently. I fully acknowledge that the very different reading I'm going to suggest may sound to begin with as though I'm simply trying to make things easier, to tailor this bit of Paul to fit our culture. But there is good, solid scholarship behind what I'm going to say, and I genuinely believe it may be the right interpretation.

When you look at strip cartoons, 'B' grade movies, and 'Z' grade novels and poems, you pick up a standard view of how 'everyone imagines' men and women behave. Men are macho, loud-mouthed, arrogant thugs, always fighting and wanting their own way. Women are simpering, empty-headed creatures, with nothing to think about except clothes and jewellery. There are 'Christian' versions of this, too: the men must make the decisions, run the show, always be in the lead, telling everyone what to do; women must stay at home and bring up the children. If you start looking for a biblical back-up for this view, well, what about Genesis 3? Adam would never have sinned if Eve hadn't given in first. Eve has her punishment, and it's pain in childbearing (Genesis 3.16).

Well, you don't have to embrace every aspect of the women's liberation movement to find that interpretation hard to swallow. Not only does it stick in our throat as a way of treating half the human race; it doesn't fit with what we see in the rest of the New Testament, in the passages we've already glanced at.

The key to the present passage, then, is to recognise that it is commanding that women, too, should be allowed to study and learn, and should not be restrained from doing so (verse 11).

They are to be ‘in full submission’; this is often taken to mean ‘to the men’, or ‘to their husbands’, but it is equally likely that it refers to their attitude, as learners, of submission to God or to the gospel – which of course would be true for men as well. Then the crucial verse 12 need not be read as ‘I do not allow a woman to teach or hold authority over a man’ – the translation which has caused so much difficulty in recent years. It can equally mean (and in context this makes much more sense): ‘I don’t mean to imply that I’m now setting up women as the new authority over men in the same way that previously men held authority over women.’ Why might Paul need to say this?

There are some signs in the letter that it was originally sent to Timothy while he was in Ephesus. And one of the main things we know about religion in Ephesus is that the main religion – the biggest Temple, the most famous shrine – was a female-only cult. The Temple of Artemis (that’s her Greek name; the Romans called her Diana) was a massive structure which dominated the area; and, as befitted worshippers of a female deity, the priests were all women. They ruled the show and kept the men in their place.

Now if you were writing a letter to someone in a small, new religious movement with a base in Ephesus, and wanted to say that because of the gospel of Jesus the old ways of organising male and female roles had to be rethought from top to bottom, with one feature of that being that the women were to be encouraged to study and learn and take a leadership role, you might well want to avoid giving the wrong impression. Was the apostle saying, people might wonder, that women should be trained up so that Christianity would gradually become a cult like that of Artemis, where women did the leading and kept the men in line? That, it seems to me, is what verse 12 is denying. The word I’ve translated ‘try to dictate to them’ is unusual, but seems to have the overtones of ‘being bossy’ or ‘seizing control’. Paul is saying, like Jesus in Luke 10, that women must have the space and leisure to study and learn in their own way, not in order that they may muscle in and take over the leadership as in the Artemis-cult, but so that men and women alike can develop whatever gifts of learning, teaching and leadership God is giving them.

What’s the point of the other bits of the passage, then?

The first verse (8) is clear: the men must give themselves to devout prayer, and must not follow the normal stereotypes of ‘male’ behaviour: no anger or arguing. Then verses 9 and 10 follow, making the same point about the women. They must be set free from their stereotype, that of fussing all the time about hair-dos, jewellery, and fancy clothes – but they must be set free, not in order that they can be dowdy, unobtrusive little mice, but so that they can make a creative contribution to the wider society. The phrase ‘good works’ in verse 10 sounds pretty bland to us, but it’s one of the regular ways people used to refer to the social obligation to spend time and money on people less fortunate than oneself, to be a benefactor of the town through helping public works, the arts, and so on.

Why then does Paul finish off with the explanation about Adam and Eve? Remember that his basic point is to insist that women, too, must be allowed to learn and study as Christians, and not be kept in unlettered, uneducated boredom and drudgery. Well, the story of Adam and Eve makes the point well: look what happened when Eve was deceived. Women need to learn just as much as men do. Adam, after all, sinned quite deliberately; he knew what he was doing, and that

it was wrong, and went ahead deliberately. The Old Testament is very stern about that kind of action.

And what about the bit about childbirth? Paul doesn't see it as a punishment. Rather, he offers an assurance that, though childbirth is indeed difficult, painful and dangerous, often the most testing moment in a woman's life, this is not a curse which must be taken as a sign of God's displeasure. God's salvation is promised to all, women and men, who follow Jesus in faith, love, holiness and prudence. And that salvation is promised to those who contribute to God's creation through childbearing, just as it is to everyone else. Becoming a mother is hard enough, God knows, without pretending it's somehow an evil thing. Let's not leave any more unexploded bombs and mines around for people to blow their minds with. Let's read this text as I believe it was intended, as a way of building up God's church, men and women, women and men alike. And, just as Paul was concerned to apply this in one particular situation, so we must think and pray carefully about where our own cultures, prejudices and angers are taking us, and make sure we conform, not to any of the different stereotypes the world offers, but to the healing, liberating, humanizing message of the gospel of Jesus.

How then would I translate the passage to bring all this out? As follows:

So this is what I want: the men should pray in every place, lifting up holy hands, with no anger or disputing. 9In the same way the women, too, should clothe themselves in an appropriate manner, modestly and sensibly. They should not go in for elaborate hair-styles, or gold, or pearls, or expensive clothes; 10instead, as is appropriate for women who profess to be godly, they should adorn themselves with good works. 11They must be allowed to study undisturbed, in full submission to God. 12I'm not saying that women should teach men, or try to dictate to them; they should be left undisturbed. 13Adam was created first, you see, and then Eve; 14and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived, and fell into trespass. 15She will, however, be kept safe through the process of childbirth, if she continues in faith, love and holiness with prudence.

Conclusion

It is high time to sum up. I think I have said enough to show you where I think the evidence points. I believe we have seriously misread the relevant passages in the New Testament, no doubt not least through a long process of assumption, tradition, and all kinds of post-biblical and sub-biblical attitudes that have crept in to Christianity. Just as I think we need radically to change our traditional pictures of the afterlife, away from the mediaeval models and back to the biblical ones, so we need radically to change our traditional pictures both of what men and women are and how they relate to one another within the church and indeed of what the Bible says on this subject. I do wonder, sometimes, if those who present radical challenges to Christianity have been all the more eager to make out that the Bible says certain things about women, as an excuse for claiming that Christianity in general is a wicked thing and we ought to abandon it. Of course, there have been plenty of Christians who have given outsiders plenty of chances to make that sort of comment. But perhaps in our generation we have an opportunity to take a large step back in the right direction. I hope and pray that this conference, and the work of this society, may be used by God in exactly that way.