1 Timothy 2

Series: “Tim Bits”

Sermon: “What’s Your Worship?”

Once upon a time, in a land far away, a beautiful, independent, self-assured princess happened upon a frog as she sat on the edge of a lovely little unpolluted pond, contemplating serious ecological issues. The frog boldly hopped over to the princess, and leapt into her lap and then said, “Dear Elegant Lady, I was once a handsome prince, until an evil witch cast a spell upon me. One kiss from you, however, and I will turn back into the dapper, handsome prince that I am, and then my sweet, we can marry, and set up housekeeping in yon castle with my mother…

Where you can prepare my meals, clean my clothes, bear my children, and forever be grateful and happy doing so.” That night as the princess dined sumptuously on a meal of lightly sautéed frog legs, seasoned with white wine and onion cream sauce, she chuckled to herself and murmured, “I don’t think so.” (A Treasury of Humor, p. 253) And so it is with great trepidation that I even attempt to deal with 2 Timothy chapter 2.

Perhaps no chapter has garnered more controversy in churches, or its subject matter on gender roles in the church, than what is before us today. And it is not just churches that wrestle with gender equality. I was fascinated recently, by a rather robust panel discussion on Feb. 14 on the CBC National, about why women in the US who declare themselves Democrats, are not flocking to support Hillary Clinton.

Madelyn Albright, at a rally in support of Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of State under Bill Clinton, stated that there is a “special place in Hell for women who do not support other women.” Really? Ms. Albright’s comment, and the panel discussion I heard, all focused on the true nature of feminism. It’s a big issue, but for today’s context, we are focusing exclusively on this passage from 1 Timothy 2. But before we dive in, just a declaration of a pet peeve of mine. I have always been very disturbed by preachers, or biblical teachers who mishandle texts.

Primarily, they mishandle them by taking a text out of context. It is called proof texting. This passage before us today is a prime example of this problem. For centuries this text has been used to prevent women from participating fully in the life of the church. Some churches, particularly in the Mennonite tradition, go so far as to use this text to segregate their worship services, with women sitting on one side of the sanctuary and men on the other.

What I need to stress, especially today, but it applies every week, is that all passages need to be seen within the whole. In this case, this passage is part of a whole letter, to a specific group of people in Ephesus, at a certain time, by a specific writer. The writer’s point in chapter 2 needs to fit in with the whole of the letter. Next the interpretation of the passage needs to be influenced by what we know from other things the writer has written; in this case the Apostle Paul.

Finally, the passage needs to be seen in the grander picture of the scriptures as a whole. How we understand a passage needs to be consistent with the rest of the bible, and particularly with the teaching and example of Jesus. So, with this in mind, let us wade in and try to sort this all out, with the Holy Spirit being our guide.

I should also tell you something that may unsettle you, and that is that many, very qualified biblical scholars, doubt that the Apostle Paul wrote this chapter. They believe it was a later addition by someone who perhaps worked with Paul, or saw an opportunity to slip this little section into the letter. The main reason scholars feel this way, is that stylistically and grammatically in the original Greek, it is very different from anything else Paul wrote. Jim Knight our resident expert in Greek would be happy to explain this to you in detail, I am sure.

To me it is an interesting question this one about authorship, but it actually changes very little. This passage is in the canon of scripture, and therefore it is important for us to learn and apply to our lives. The first thing we need to understand right off the bat, is that 1 Timothy chapter 2 is a passage directed at the subject, not on gender relations in the church, but on how we worship. That’s the main point.

The false teachers in Ephesus, that I mentioned last week, had seriously disrupted the fellowship. Each false teacher was trying to build their own little following, and this divisiveness was therefore carried over into the worship services. Therefore, some preachers and scholars think that the women in the Ephesian church were the problem, so they needed to be quiet.

What most people miss in this passage is that men were disrupting the service as much, if not more than any woman ever did. The theological debates, and schisms of the church, became public rows, with men and as we shall see also, women shouting at each other, when they should have been worshipping. Specifically, it was hurting their God given responsibility to pray for each other. Paul’s concern here is that not only were those of the faith being harmed, but any hope of evangelizing anyone else was lost.

As Paul states, God wants everyone to be saved, and what was going on in their worship was not helping this goal. So, Paul starts with the men, who led the squabbles. “I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up, free from anger and controversy.” The hands lifted up is the traditional Jewish prayer stance. The stance pictured in Exodus 30:19-21 represented that their hearts were pure and God was their focus. First we deal with our sin, then we talk openly with God.

If we are not right with God, or right with each other, we cannot worship or even pray properly. If the false teachers draw us away from that purpose, they are not true servants of God. The bottom line here is that anything that disrupts people from focusing on God is a problem, and it needs to be addressed. Only after Paul has addressed the men of the congregation, does he then shift to address woman.

Again the issue is the disruption of worship, and Paul has two major concerns. The first is usually not talked about, because it seems reasonable to most people, but maybe we pass by it too quickly. Paul tells the Ephesian women to dress modestly, to not wear clothing that draws attention to themselves. Now we must be careful here in not reading the word modestly, and thinking immediately that the women were dressing provocatively or in a sexual way.

The modesty Paul talks about has to do not with sexuality, but with wealth. In the Ephesian culture, and Greek culture in general at the time, women would often want to publicly display their wealth. This meant going out in public in expensive clothes and adornments or jewelry.

The distraction wasn’t necessarily directed at men, but at other woman. It was a way of flaunting wealth and economic advantage. In such a setting, those women with little or no financial means would be made to feel less important and less valued. If you think this is no longer an issue I only share with you a story from a Pastor who while on vacation decided to visit an upper middle-class church in Dallas (although it could have been any large city).

When he entered the sanctuary, the first thing that struck him was the glitter of jewelry, the expensive clothes and fashionable hairstyles. Every time someone entered and walked down the aisle people would crane their necks to look each other over and size each other up. Anyone who was from a lower economic situation would never feel welcome in such a place.

This is the modesty Paul is appealing to, although other forms of immodesty are also an issue. Followers of Christ, whether they be men or women are to be known for their good deeds. These should be our adornments. Good deeds speak to our true adherence to the faith. Nothing we do, or wear, should ever distract people from prayer and focusing on God. Displays of material excess, or friction in the fellowship confuse those outside the fellowship who are seeking God.

Well, I guess I can’t put it off any longer. What shall we do with verses 11-15? Generally, there are two approaches to these verses. One position held by many fundamentalist Christians, is that women are prohibited from teaching, or holding authority over men. Usually this means, no women are to preach, teach bible studies, and they are to be submissive to men. Furthermore, Paul’s use of the Genesis story here, is argued by some to support this position.

That is Eve’s subordinate position to Adam. Although that is a poor interpretation of Genesis. This position is problematic for many reasons, least of all our modern sensibilities. Most churches today would cease to function without the tireless work and contribution of woman; including Donway. Some churches make exceptions to this rule by allowing limited leadership by women, like teaching children, but it lends itself to hypocrisy.

It is either a rule or it isn’t. The second position, which in my mind is the more reasonable one, and the one consistent with our rules of interpretation, like keeping this in context; centers on the idea that this passage was written to a specific church, at a specific time and circumstance. Several ideas have been offered as explaining this passage in its historical context. Many seem to have good merit.

One idea that holds good promise for me is that we must keep in mind that at this time the Ephesian church was under siege by false teachers. It has also been theorized that these false teachers encouraged women in the church to speak out in favour of their positions, in opposition to Timothy, and other approved teachers. It is also possible, that having experienced their new found freedom in Christ, some women lost all restraint in speaking without knowledge, as did some of their male counter parts, which we saw earlier.

This pronouncement really has more to do with overstepping one’s place in challenging authority, any authority. It is also true that the freedom and equality found in Christ was a work in progress in the church.

Paul never condemned slavery, and freely acknowledged that there were slaves in the church but none of us today would think slavery was a good thing, or even acceptable in Christ’s church. As freedom and equality grew in the church, social structures began to breakdown and change. Paul also wrote in Galatians 3:26-28, *“So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have been made like him. There is no longer Jew or gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians -you are one in Christ Jesus.”*

Equality was the goal and the ideal, but as we all know, revolutionary ideas take time to take hold. In many ways in our society, we are still going through these changes. Some will resist, quite strongly even, but the change is coming and already is happening.

Our faith gives us a new social awareness, and cultural sensitivity, and any major social changes demanded by Paul out of the gate, would have brought chaos and hostility down onto the fledgling church. So, it seems that we must be very cautious in using Paul’s words about submission and silence and authority, very carefully, and never assume they are to be universally applied. Much of the victory over sin and society’s ills will not occur in this life time, but only when Christ returns.

The other beautiful thing often overlooked here is that Paul encourages women to learn. This is a direct departure from Judaism which refused to allow women to learn about the Torah. To encourage women to learn was truly a major shift in cultural practices. And as we know, in some parts of the world, even today, girls are often barred from education, and especially higher education. Christians are therefore to be education advocates for all people.

Now a word needs to be said about the final little bit of this passage that seems very odd. Paul refers to the Genesis account and the very male centered idea that Eve tempted Adam and brought on the fall. This despite the fact that Genesis 3 states that Adam was with her

when the serpent tempted her. Actually, the struggles between genders, and the dominance of men are described by Genesis as part of the curse of the fall.

It seems probable that Paul is concerned that women who followed the teaching of the false teachers were responsible for leading men or others away from the truth, thus replaying the Genesis story. The parroting of the false doctrine was really a continuation of the curse started with Eve. Then there is verse 15, “But women will be saved through childbearing”. What’s that all about?

The Greek here is confusing, but many scholars believe that there was supposed to be an indefinite article before the word for childbearing. In other words, the phrase should read, “But women will be saved through the childbearing or better “the birth” or “birth of a child”. This make better sense with the next phrase about living in love, holiness and modesty. The phrase was probably meant to convey not the women giving birth, but more accurately being born again in Jesus. In other words; salvation.

This is only one interpretation, and this awkward phrase is one of the strong reasons many scholars believe Paul did not write this chapter.

Lowel D. Streiker tells of a time when he was pastor of the Little Brown Church; he wtites as follows. “I was greatly annoyed by Karl Neufeld, and elderly member, who fell asleep during my sermon every Sunday. So after the service one day, I said to his grandson who always accompanied the senior citizen, ‘If you can keep the old man awake, I’ll pay you a dollar.’ This worked for two weeks; the aged man was very alert and listened to the sermon attentively.

On the third Sunday, however, there he was, up to his old tricks, sound asleep in his pew. After the service, I called the boy over and said, ‘I am disappointed in you. Didn’t I promise you a dollar a week to keep your grandfather awake?’ ‘Yes’, replied the boy, ‘but grandpa gives me five dollars not to disturb him.” (A Treasury of Humor, p. 363)

Anything that regularly distracts us from worshipping God is a not a good thing. And one of the greatest distractions confronting us is ever thinking that God would ever reject someone’s service simply because of a chromosome. “The harvest is ripe but the labourers are few”, Jesus said. How dare we exclude any willing heart and able hands. And how dare we allow anything to keep us from worship God in Spirit and in truth.