

Paul's concern for the women in Timothy's churches.

Notes on 1 Tim 2.8-15.

One of the texts often quoted in discussion of the concept of 'male headship' is 1 Tim 2. 8 – 15, although, of course, the language of 'head' comes from 1 Corinthians. It is presented as a definitive statement of the Apostle's view about the impermissibility of women teaching or exercising authority over men in the Church. A common interpretation of this text is the one given in the NIV: 'I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent.' The basis for this standpoint taken by Paul, it is argued, is the creation order ('Adam was formed first'), and that because of the Fall, women are likely to be less reliable teachers than men.

However, there is another way of looking at this text.

The setting to which (according to 1 Timothy) Paul is writing:

- (i) It is a letter to young Timothy,(4.12), (frequently ill 5.23), to help him in the task of church leadership (1.3) in the church, or - more likely - house churches, in Ephesus. (cf. 'from house to house', Acts 20.20).
- (ii) Some people are teaching 'different doctrine' (1.3), occupied with various speculations, and they need to be instructed.
- (iii) Some are desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding what they are saying. (1.7). There seems to be some teaching around which has grown a morbid craving for controversy and disputes about words. (6.4). Some may even be arguing that the law has no place in Christian faith (1.8).
- (iv) The author is strengthening Timothy in the fight of faith. (1.18).
- (vi) There seems to be some anger and argument when men are praying (2.8).
- (vii) Some women seem not to be dressing modestly. (2.9).
- (viii) Some women seem to be taking a teaching role, and assuming authority in services of worship. (2.11,12). Some of the widows are living for pleasure (5.6); some of the younger widows are ruled by sensual desires, are idle, gad about from house to house, gossiping and being busybodies, saying things they should not.(5.11-13). Some people even forbid marriage (4.3). Some have already turned away to follow Satan (5.15).
- (ix) The Letter says that Paul is hoping to visit them soon, but in case he is delayed he is giving instructions to Timothy about how people ought to behave in church. (3.14-15). The implication is that Paul will sort things out when he comes, but young Timothy needs his hand strengthened in the meantime.
- (x) Some of the false teaching in the church could be a sign of the 'last times'.(4.1).

What are Paul's instructions?

- (i) The first task is prayer for all leaders 'that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity' (2.1f).
- (ii) Church leaders must have good character and manage their own households well (2.3f).
- (iii) Women church leaders must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate and faithful in all things (3.11).

- (iv) Timothy is to have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales, but rather train himself in godliness. (4.7)
- (v) Timothy must insist and teach a good example in speech and conduct; he is to give attention to the public reading of scripture and to exhorting and teaching. (4.13), he is to give honour to the elders and widows, uphold the importance of family responsibilities (5.8), honour especially the ruling elders who labour in preaching and teaching (5.17). The Apostle would prefer the younger widows to marry and have children and manage their households, 'so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us.' (4.14).
- (vi) It is important to preserve the integrity of teaching, even among slaves (6.1), from whom there must be respect and service in the church.
- (vii) Sound teaching is in accord with the words of Jesus and with godliness.(6.3).
- (viii) Timothy is to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness, he is to avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (6.20).
- (ix) There is other teaching in this Epistle, not least about the nature of God, and God's revelation, and also the temptations which money can bring; but our focus here is Paul's concern for women.

So what of 1 Tim 2. 8 – 15?

We have in Ephesus a church situation in which some women are dressing immodestly; some are assuming the freedom to teach in church, even 'lording it over' the men when they do not understand what they are saying, (The verb is *authenteo*, 'usurping authority', not the usual word for exercising authority which is *exousiazō*). Paul is talking about disruptive self-assertion. Some of the younger widows are going from house church to house church gossiping and causing trouble. Maybe they think they are expressing their new found freedom in Christ, and disregarding God's law, but in their self-assertion, they are straying into ways of ungodliness.

So, says this Letter, if anyone is going to teach, (and women *could* teach, cf. Titus 2.3), they first have to learn. (2.11). Paul does not command all women not to teach, but he does command them to learn. They are to learn 'in quietness' (*hesouchia* does not mean in 'silence'). Their quietness is to be 'with full submission' (2.11) - i.e. submission to the church in worship (contrast the 'disobedient' in 1.9). Arguing (in men) and immodest dress (in women) both violate the call to mutual submission. The church should be at peace. So women must be in church 'in quietness' (2.11). While they are learning, they are not to 'domineer' ('usurp authority') over men.

We referred to the interpretation of 1 Tim 2. 12 reflected in the wording of the NIV. Given the specific situation into which Paul is writing, and his concern about the women causing trouble in the house churches in Ephesus, and his imperative instruction that they must 'learn', a better interpretation for 1 Tim 2. 12 is: 'I permit no woman to teach, or usurp authority over a man: they are to keep quiet.' In its context, this seems to be saying: We cannot have women who have not properly understood the Gospel and the radical call to godliness assuming the right to teach in church and house groups. So, Timothy, in order to get things back on an even keel, women who have not 'learned' the faith are not to teach – they are to stop gossiping and should remain quiet in worship. They are in danger of leading others into error. In this connection, we are reminded of the story of the Garden of Eden.

Perhaps this is a sort of illustration of the situation at Ephesus: like Eve, some of the women in the church have been deceived and are leading others astray. Or perhaps, as seems quite possible, one of the ‘false doctrines’ around was the idea that Eve was formed first and not Adam. Maybe some of the women were teaching this. Perhaps they were also teaching that everything was Adam’s fault. No: Eve sinned as well! That is not to say, Timothy, that your Christian young women will not be saved; but against those who forbid marriage (4.3), and against those who make out that freedom from marriage and from child-bearing is part of Christian freedom, we need to reaffirm that having children is part of God’s purpose and does not get in the way of salvation. On the contrary, child-bearing is fully part of God’s salvation purpose, provided it is linked with faith and love, holiness and modesty. The crucially important issues for you, Timothy, are to safeguard the integrity of Gospel teaching, and to uphold marriage and family life. As far as the ministry of women in your churches are concerned, they need to learn about both these things before they can teach.

So, Timothy, these are my instructions for the house churches of Ephesus until I can be with you. Guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. Grace be with you. (6. 20f.)

Conclusion

It is very far from clear on this interpretation that 1 Tim 2. 8 – 15 supports the concept of what in recent years has come to be called ‘male headship’ in the Church. When coupled with the ‘multiple meanings’¹ of *kephale* - often simply translated ‘head’, as though its meaning is obvious - in 1 Corinthians 11.3; and with the dangers of reading 1 Cor 11.3 in support of a subordinationism which borders on heretical Christology, it suggests that those who claim that ‘male headship in Church’ is a biblical doctrine need to be very careful indeed about exactly what they mean.

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¹ to quote Anthony Thiselton’s major commentary on 1 Corinthians: Anthony C. Thiselton, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans/Paternoster, 2000, pp. 812 – 822.