

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Exploding the Stereotypes

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Jeremiah 29:1-9

1 Timothy 2

If there is one chapter in the Bible which women preachers are supposed to fight shy of, it's the second chapter of Paul's first letter to Timothy. If there is one chapter which those who would rather not see women preach hold up as their justification, it is this chapter which we have read today. "You can't get away from 1 Timothy 2" I was once told. Well, I don't want to get away from it. It has long been important to me, and it played a crucial role in helping me understand what my call is.

But this part of Paul's letter is about more than just what a woman may or may not, should or should not do. Having introduced his letter by reminding Timothy that the aim of the gospel is love and that Jesus is able to save everyone and anyone, Paul turns to instruction about how a congregation of God's people should operate. And the first thing is that they should pray.

When you kneel or sit down to pray, I wonder who is top of your list? Most likely you pray first for friends and family, and branch out from there to neighbours and those whose suffering is seen in the news. But Paul says that actually first of all we should pray for our national leaders. First. And that's not just if we agree with them. Timothy and Paul were living in a society where because of their belief, and partially because of their race, they might at any time find themselves opposed by the Roman regime. They might - Paul at least certainly did - find themselves hauled off to jail and kept there at someone else's pleasure.

There were those who thought that such governments should be opposed, not prayed for: just as there are those who think that unjust regimes nowadays should be condemned. But Jeremiah had taught the people of his day that they should pray even for those who had taken them off into exile. They should seek the good of the place where they found themselves living; even if it wasn't where they would like to be or with the rulers and rule they would best enjoy. Paul likewise says we should pray. If rulers are unwise or even wicked, how much they need prayer! If rulers are well-meaning they still carry a heavy burden and need prayer. And no one, remember, is beyond the saving power of Christ. So we should pray first for our rulers.

Remember that when you come to God in your times of private prayer. And remember that nowadays, when we know so much more so much more immediately, we can and should pray for leaders around the world. We should pray for President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan, who has choices to make which will help or hinder the relief getting to his people. He may not always know what the consequences of this decision or that one will be. We should pray for President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan. We should pray for Barack Obama, for Shimon Peres, and of course for Alex Salmond and David Cameron. What these people decide and do will affect the others for whom you pray.

And who should pray? Men. Not just men, of course, but men should pray.

Now we are getting into the part of the chapter where Paul is going to talk about gender.

There is a certain stereotype which runs through our culture about how men and women behave. You know: that women gossip; that real men don't cry; that women spend hours in the bathroom (have you ever lived with a teenage boy?); that men are strong and capable; that women are fluffy and empty-headed; that men are given to violence. It's all stereotype and cartoon-ish exaggeration, and you know just by thinking about yourself and those you know best, that no one is described by these generalities. What is worrying is when we think that we ought to conform to them, or, worse, when we think that others ought to conform to them and seek to make it so.

This chapter has often been used to reinforce the stereotype, especially for women, but that isn't what Paul intends at all. His intention, the aim of his gospel, is love, and love sets us free from being what we're not to being what we are: whatever that is.

The first people to be released are the men. The cartoon image of men is that they quarrel and are violent. So Paul says that you don't have to be like that, men. Instead you can pray. You should pray. And when we pray, when we pray with others, the desire for argument and violence dies within us. Even if you are at odds with your fellow-prayer, you will express your differences differently if you come before God's throne together. Men are to pray. That doesn't mean that women are not to pray, of course. But go to almost any prayer meeting, and look around you. Most often the majority of people there (though not necessarily speaking!) are women. Men, you're free to pray! And you're free to find ways and times to pray which suit you.

And women, you're free too. Free from having to spend ages fussing over your looks if you don't want to. That was a stereotype in Paul's day as now, and the pressure that the world puts on a woman to look good, to look young, to look slim, to look attractive is one which many women, especially younger women, submit to without a thought. But really women, we should be more concerned to live well, to do good with our lives than to look good. Anyway, what you are inside will shine through, and there is no point in having an exquisite face if the emptiness of your soul shows on its expressionless surface. The good news of Jesus sets us free from making our exteriors the focus of our attention.

And it sets us free to learn. "Let a woman learn in silence." says Paul. Let her learn. This is not about enforcing chattering women to be quiet - women are not the only chatterers. It is about permitting her to learn. You remember how Jesus quietly rebuked Martha when she wanted to disturb Mary's listening and learning and make her do "women's work which is never done." No, she was to be allowed to learn undisturbed. And that is what Paul is saying here. Women are not to be regarded as simply pourers of the tea, providers of the food. Women are not to be thought of, or to think of themselves as too empty-headed to understand the things of God. They are to be allowed to learn.

But why? What are they to do with what they learn? Timothy and the men of his congregation might have been a little scared by this permission to women. They lived in Ephesus, which was the centre of the Roman cult of the goddess Diana. That cult was carried out by priestesses, who had total power and kept the men in line. Was Paul envisaging something similar for the church? Was that why women were to be allowed to study?

No. Verse 12 of our chapter is well-translated as something like, "I'm not saying that women should teach men or try to dictate to them; rather that they should be left undisturbed." Here, as far as I am concerned, is the crux of the matter.

When I first heard God calling me to be a preacher I was incredulous, because I had been brought up to believe that women shouldn't do that, that God didn't like it. So how could he be calling me? I went through the New Testament, knowing that there was something about it somewhere. And I came to 1 Timothy 2:12. "Well, that's that," I said to myself with relief. "Here it is in black and white. I can't be called to preach. What a relief!"

But the niggle wouldn't go away. So I decided that in fairness to the verse, I should look at it in the Greek. There I made two discoveries. First of all the word which is translated "I allow" has its root meaning of giving over to the entire management or trust of anyone. So Paul is saying that in the church as a whole the entire running should not be left to the women. Then he says that they are not to lord it over the men. But then other parts of scripture say that no one who is a teacher should lord it over those taught. Peter is very keen on this idea. And Paul himself, at the beginning of this letter is pretty scathing about those who teach from other motives than love - and love is never self-vaunting, never looks down on others and insists on its own way. No Christian teachers are to be like that.

So women, who are permitted to learn are freed from having to have the whole burden of running the church on their shoulders. They are freed from the stereotype of being domineering, hen-pecking the men. Women shouldn't get above themselves, and if they do, they should remember the story of Adam and Eve and what

happened when the woman insisted on her own way then.

But there is one area where even in Christ Jesus our gender makes a difference, and that's the biological. Women bear children and men don't. And Paul says that women will be saved in childbearing. That doesn't mean that in order to be saved a woman has to have children. That would be manifestly unfair on single women and couples who can't conceive. The word "Save" also means "Keep safe". Paul is saying that in this area where women and men are different, God will keep women safe in the dangers of child-birth.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul insisted that in Christ there is "no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) In the church we look only on the gifts that God has given people; we turn away from stereotype so that people are free to be themselves, the individuals that God created them. There is no difference. The church isn't to be left only to the women to pray or to the men to learn and lead. And no one is to try to lead by personal domination. Christ is the head, the leader of the church and all of us are to be in submission to him, his words and his ways. And he was the one who accepted the ministry of women, who called the unacceptable to be his followers, who defied the stereotypes of what his own role and programme should be.

He is our head. If we submit to his leading then we can only expect that the clichés, the caricatures of who we are and what we are to be will be not just put aside, but smashed into a million pieces. Christ sets us free to be people in ministry together. Let's rejoice in the gifts he gives each of us and get on with using them together in his service.

Amen