

ADAM'S RIB OR WOMEN'S LIB?

by Ray C. Stedman

We are approaching one of the major battlefields of Scripture, the controversial passage from Chapter 2 of Paul's first letter to Timothy. Many have fought and still are fighting over this section. We have to approach it with great care, and yet deal with it thoroughly. I want to remind you of one fact which we must hold clearly in mind: The subject under discussion in this passage, as well as in this entire chapter, is prayer. Paul is writing about the worship of the congregation when they come together, especially as that worship centers on and focuses in prayer. So the passage that touches on women and on their ministry among us grows out of that subject.

Paul has already given us a brief description of the different kinds of prayer. We have looked at his word on whom we should pray for, and the helpful statement he gave us about the results of congregational prayer. Prayer permits us to live peaceful and godly lives; it affects the community; it reduces violence, opens up understanding, and enables relationships to be developed. We must never forget that God has placed the Christian church in a very relevant position in the world regarding these matters.

Then, second, Paul tells us that prayer becomes an instrument for the salvation of all kinds of people. He says, God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (Verse 4). The word "all" means all kinds of men and women without distinction.

In Verses 8-10, the apostle continues on that subject of prayer, discussing the atmosphere in which prayer is to be made, i.e.. the specific attitudes both men and women should have when they pray in a congregational meeting. This is what he says:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. {1 Tim 2:8-10 RSV}

When Paul says he desires that "in every place the men should pray" (Verse 8), he does not mean that only men should pray. In some denominations and churches this verse has been taken that way, so that only men are permitted to pray in public or to lead the congregation in prayer. But that is not what the apostle means. He is not saying that only men should pray, but that when men pray in every place they should do so in a two-fold way -- lifting up holy hands, and without anger or quarreling in their hearts. In other words, Paul's concern is not who prays here, but how they pray.

The first characteristic is that men should "lift up holy hands." That was the usual posture of prayer, derived largely from the Jewish synagogues, where the Jews prayed while standing with their arms lifted up, and led the congregation that way. All Paul is saying is that when men pray that way there ought to be two things that are characteristic of them:

- One, the hands lifted up should be holy hands. That does not mean that something religious has to be done to them -- that they should be sprinkled with holy water or something like that. Rather, this is a figure of speech which means that these men's actions, symbolized by the hands, should be right actions. These are men who ought to have a record of rightful behavior, who are recognized as honest, whose actions reflect their faith.
- Second, their attitudes toward one another must be "without anger or quarreling." Their relationships have to be right. They must not be bitter or resentful against somebody, angry about something that has never been brought out or discussed. Those are the ones who are to lead in prayer.

When I was growing up as a boy in Montana, we used to have Methodist services only once a month because there was no Methodist church in town. Each month when the service was held you could count on the fact that a lean, tall man would always lead in prayer. His prayer was anywhere from ten to fifteen minutes in length. Almost everyone went to sleep on him. But what made it worse was that he was widely known in the community as the biggest rascal in town. His sharp business practices had turned everybody off, so that his prayer was hypocrisy, and he was despised in that community as a hypocrite. All the apostle is saying here in this verse is that when men pray in public they must live in private what they pray.

But Paul goes on to say also that women should pray. Now I recognize that the actual wording of this section about women does not say that they should pray, but this is part of the passage where Paul is dealing with prayer. He is designating how men should pray and how women should pray, so that the words, "should pray" (pertaining to women) are implied in the word "also."

That is really a very weak translation. The word in the original language is very strong. It is translated in some versions, "likewise," or "similarly," or "so also," "in like manner." The clear implication is, "in like manner, women are to pray." But, like the men, they too are to be characterized by godly lives, not merely outward display. So this passage clearly implies that as men are to pray with right actions and right attitudes, so likewise women should pray with proper and modest dress, and with a record of a life of good deeds.

Taken that way, this passage agrees exactly with what Paul says in First Corinthians 11 about women in the congregation. There he acknowledges that women could "pray and prophesy" in the church ("prophesy" means "to comment on the Scripture, to expound it") but they must have their heads covered as a demonstration of their agreement with the principle of headship. (This principle is discussed more fully there in that chapter in First Corinthians. It also comes in here in the words that follow.)

Paul is not trying here to regulate women's dress. If you read it that way you have misunderstood this passage. When Paul says women should not have "braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire," he is not attacking the way women dress, except as it is a display of what their heart attitude was. God looks at the heart; he does not pay any attention to the outward man. But oftentimes the way we dress and the way we conduct ourselves is a vivid revelation to others around of what our hearts are like. So that if a woman comes with her hair done up in the latest fashion, wearing the latest low-cut dress and flashy jewelry, she is obviously not trying to get God's attention; she wants men's attention. Her choice of clothing, etc., reveals her heart. This is what the apostle is talking about.

Years ago I saw a woman come into our congregation who was really a sight. (It is one thing to call a woman a vision, but quite another thing to call her a sight -- and she was a sight!) She had on one of those revealing gownless evening straps; her face was heavily painted and her hair was done in the very latest coiffeur. It was obvious that her heart at that time was committed to keeping up with the latest styles. At least it appeared that way, but actually she proved to be hungry of heart, wanting something more. She came to Christ, and it was interesting to watch how, without a word from anyone, her whole behavior and dress changed, as it reflected what was going on in her heart.

On the other hand, some women have taken this word of Paul so literally that they have gone to the other extreme. They come to church frumpy and dowdy, in their dullest dress, with their hair hardly made up at all, or pulled straight back in a bun, with no lipstick or makeup on, and imagine that they are thus being pleasing to God. But actually, all they are doing is trying to attract attention too. They want to be known as "spiritual women," so they dress that way. But that is just as much a violation of this principle as any flashy dress would be.

It is not what happens on the outside that God is impressed with, rather, it is with the inward. Sometimes you cannot change the outward very much. (I heard Phyllis Diller say that she spent three hours in a beauty shop -- and that was just for the estimate!) Here the apostle is stressing the fact that a woman's impact, spiritually, in a congregation will arise out of the fact that her dress conveys that she is not seeking attention or trying to be sexy, but rather that her life of good deeds is making her respected by that congregation and having great influence among them.

Out of this discussion on church prayer the subject now very naturally turns to public teaching -- and especially the role of women in teaching. Having dealt with the matter of a woman praying (how she should pray and what will complement that prayer) Paul now says (Verse 11):

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. {1 Tim 2:11-14 RSV}

Here is the area of great controversy: "What part can a woman play in a church service, in its leading, its speaking, and its teaching?" According to this translation, women should be "silent" in church. That word occurs twice in this passage: that a woman should "learn in silence" (Vs. 11), and, she is to "keep silent" (Vs. 12). I have been in churches where this was taken so literally that women were actually prohibited from even saying "Hello" to anybody in the auditorium; they could not even open their mouths, literally, when they entered into the sanctuary or auditorium.

But that is obviously a very extreme and wrong translation. The reason I say that is because the same word that is translated "silent" here occurs also in adjectival form in Verse 2 of this same chapter. There we read that we are to pray for "kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life." The word "peaceable" is the same word which is translated "silent" here. But surely Verse 2 does not mean that we may lead lives of absolute silence. It clearly means that we are to live an undisturbed life, i.e., without a great deal of hassling, etc., but a "peaceable" life. That is a good translation for this word, which, if carried over here to this section we are studying, changes the thought entirely.

Furthermore, if you look at Second Thessalonians 3:12, the apostle uses this same word again. He says of certain persons who were busybodies, "Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in *quietness* ." There is the same word which is translated *silent* here. Paul is not telling people to work silently but to be peaceful about it, to not make a big to-do about it, to work privately, without a lot of public notice. So when we read this translation in that sense, then all that Paul is saying is, "Let a woman learn in a 'peaceful' way; she is to keep herself 'peaceful' and 'peaceable.'"

What Paul is really talking about, of course, is her attitude. Just as he has all through this section, the apostle is dealing with the attitudes which men and women are to have when they pray. Women are not to have an attitude of argumentative aggressiveness, assertiveness, or stubborn insistence on having their own way or their own view recognized. Rather, their attitude is to be one of reasonableness, patience, and a willingness to listen to others.

Now when Paul says, "let a woman learn in peace [or peaceableness] with all submissiveness," he does not mean to imply that women are always and only to be the learners, while men are always and only to be the teachers. These are very artificial understandings of this verse. Rather, he means that when women are learners, they are to learn in a spirit of quietness -- as are men. But women are not always learners. We have a great many well-taught women in our congregation here, some of whom have learned a lot more than many men have. (In an ultimate sense, of course, all Christians are always learning and are always learners.) All the apostle means by this is that when women are in the role and position of learners, they are to do so without aggressive reaction and challenging in a loud and assertive way. (It may be that this reflects something of the cultural pattern of Ephesus. In those great Greek cities women often participated in government. They perhaps carried this over into the affairs of the church and were aggressive and vociferous about their points of view. This is what the apostle is correcting here.)

Verses 12-14, however, are the key verses:

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. {1 Tim 2:12-14 RSV}

As we have already seen, this is not an absolute prohibition against teaching. Paul does not say, "I permit no

woman to teach, anywhere, anytime, to anyone, period!" -- although this passage has been taken to mean that. It is clear from other passages in the New Testament that women did teach. In fact, in his letter to Titus, Paul tells the older women to teach younger women how to love their husbands and rule their children, etc. So women were expected to teach. Also, there are instances in Scripture where women taught men.

One notable case was when Aquila and his wife Priscilla took Apollos, the eloquent orator of the early church, aside and instructed him further in the doctrines of Jesus. Priscilla is linked with her husband as one of those instructors. So clearly, women did teach. Paul is not saying they cannot teach, period.

The key to this passage is the word translated, "to have authority over." It governs both the teaching and the attitude of the woman. This Greek word, *authentain*, means "to domineer, to usurp authority, to take what is not rightfully yours," and to do so (is the implication) by the process of teaching. In other words, women are not to take over in a church and become the final, authoritative teachers.

It is true that this passage makes no mention of eldership, yet I think it answers the question that many are asking today: "Should a woman be an elder or a pastor of a church?" As far as the latter is concerned, it depends upon how you are using the word *pastor*. If you use it in a biblical sense, in which it means, "a shepherd of a flock," then women have been pastors for centuries. In every church there are women who teach Sunday School classes. A little flock gathers around the teacher, who is the leader, the guide and the guardian of that flock. In that sense she is a biblical pastor. But if you use that word in the conventional sense, in which a woman is to be the final voice of authority as to what the Scriptures mean (this is what Paul is talking about), in that sense a woman is not to be a pastor or an elder.

This interpretation of women as being excluded from eldership is confirmed by one incontrovertible fact: There were, in the New Testament, no women apostles and no women elders! Jesus could have settled this controversy at the very beginning by appointing Mary Magdalene as an apostle, but he did not do so. Neither Paul, nor any of the apostles, ever chose a woman to be an elder of the churches they founded, though they could easily have done so if it were right. There were many godly and capable women available, but none was ever put in the office of elder.

Many churches today are unbiblical in that they have a single pastor or a single elder in final authority. The churches in the New Testament knew nothing of that. They always had pastors (plural) and elders (plural). No one person was ever given a final voice of authority. Elders reached unanimous decisions after much prayer and deliberation as to what the final teaching of the Scriptures meant. It is that role which is denied to women by the apostle here.

There are two reasons why. Notice that Paul does not take these reasons from culture, but from creation. This is a very important point. Many of the comments you read on this passage will make it appear that Paul is prohibiting women from this kind of authoritative teaching because of the cultural patterns of that day. That is not true. Paul says there are things that stem right from creation that are different about men and women, and which have application to this problem here.

One: "Adam was formed first, then Eve." That is all he says, but evidently that prior creation of man before woman is very important in his mind. In the account in Genesis it was obviously also important in the mind of God. He deliberately formed a male first and gave him a job to do before the woman ever came along. Adam may have been living for a considerable period of time before Eve was taken from his side and brought to him. The task Adam was given was to name all the animals, which means that he was involved in a research project. He had to investigate all the animals, because in the Bible names reflect nature. This was a long task, as there were many animals (later, the ark was filled with them).

So Adam had a large task at hand. How long he took we do not know, but we do know that while he was working at this task, he was looking for something; Scripture tells us he was searching. He noted that the animals came in pairs; that there were two kinds of each species -- a male and a female kind -- and that they seemed to belong together. He was looking for that for himself all through creation. When he had finished he had not yet found anything to correspond to himself.

At that point God performed the first surgical operation, complete with anaesthesia. He put Adam to sleep and took a rib from his side, made of it a woman, and brought her to Adam. The first word Adam said was, "At last!" (Men have been saying that about tardy women ever since!) But what Adam meant, of course, was, "Finally, I have found that which completes me, corresponds to me, is equal with me, is sent to help me fulfill the task which God has given me to do."

The implication the apostle seems to draw from this is not that men are always the leaders (because I do not think they always necessarily are), but that when they lead they are to do so in a certain "male" way, while women, when they lead, are to do so in a certain "female" way. The two complement one another, but that peculiar quality which is given to the male is that of initiation. That is why he was sent first into the world; he had something to do first.

The remarkable testimony of history is that males have a strange restlessness to discover, to explore, to climb to the highest mountain, to plumb the depths of the deepest sea, to get out into space, to find something. Very rarely do you find names of women among the great explorers of history. It is almost always men who do so, because that is their nature. Occasional individual examples of women who have an urge to explore may be found, but in general this is not true.

Paul carries that over into the church. He says, in effect, that in this realm of discovery, of investigation into the mind and the thinking of God, and the hidden mysteries of Scripture, the male is the one who is to make that initial venture. The woman is to be there to fulfill, to console, to comfort, to complete. Women do have a part in this, but in the ultimate role of decision making in the realm of theology the male is given this task.

Paul's second argument comes also from the difference created in nature. He says, "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." Paul implies that the reason woman was deceived was because her nature made her more vulnerable in this area.

We ought to remember that Adam was more culpable, he was a worse sinner than Eve, because, not being deceived, he still deliberately sinned, while Eve thought she was doing the right thing, something which would benefit her husband and herself. The apostle seizes on this as an indication of a difference between man and woman, suggesting that this is not a matter of inferiority at all, rather, it is just a difference.

It is the glory of woman that she is more responsive than man to what is around her. That is what makes life beautiful. How dull and cold and barbarous life would be if only cold-blooded men were here to confront the world of creation! Women add that quality of tenderness, softness, empathy, sympathy and comfort to the world. They add something that no man can give, and yet, because of that role in life they are prohibited from making final decisions in the church. Paul is not talking here about secular life. He is talking about the church and of this final role of investigation of the mind and thought of God.

The difference Paul is referring to is the difference between a knife and a fork. They do not perform the same functions, yet we use them at the same time while we are eating. But we do not insist that they be employed the same way. (Although some people do use knives to pick up food. I remember a little jingle that goes:

I eat my peas with honey,
I've done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny,
But it keeps them on the knife!

I have met people who do eat their peas with their knife, but that is not what knives are for; forks are for that.) Yet we do not get upset because people use their knives and forks in distinctive ways. We do not claim the knife is inferior to the fork or the fork is inferior to the knife. Neither should we with men and women. They are made to do different things.

Today, after a lot of discussion and controversy in this whole area, even secular thinking is coming around to recognizing that there are these distinctive, created differences between men and women.

What the apostle is saying, then, is that women are not given the role of final decision on doctrinal issues. They are not to be the authoritative teachers of the church. They are to teach, they are to pray, they are to prophecy. They can fill these roles in very helpful and wonderful ways since they have been given spiritual gifts the same as men; they can add ingredients and qualities that no man can give. But as for the final determiners of teaching, they are to leave this to the male, because a woman's empathy and natural tendency to respond is sensitive at this point. The major problem of the church, as we see in this letter, is to detect error and not to be deceived by it. We are up against a clever, skilled and ruthless Deceiver, who presents truth in ways that look right and real. Men can be deceived too, but the apostle's argument is that they women are less likely to be deceived than women.

Paul then adds this rather strange word in Verse 15:

Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. {1 Tim 2:15 RSV}

That is a rather garbled version. Unfortunately, it is difficult to understand what was originally said here because the transmission is faulty at this point, and many of the scholars have argued over this.

There are two things we need to ask ourselves here: What is meant by the word *saved*? and, "What is meant by this reference to *bearing children* ?

If this latter means that women are promised to be kept safe through labor, then this is a promise that is not always fulfilled, because many godly women have died in childbirth. I do not think this verse means that.

The verse literally says, "She will be saved through the childbearing." Because of the emphasis of the article, some have taken this to be a reference to the virgin birth of Jesus -- that women will be saved through the childbearing that Mary accomplished when Jesus was born. It is possible that it means that, but again, this does not seem to be very significant, because if that is true, what else is new? Everybody is saved that way. There is only one Savior. Paul just said so in Verse 5 of this chapter: "There is only one mediator between God and man." Why should Paul single out women and give particular attention to them if both men and women are saved through the One who was born of the virgin? (Strictly speaking, of course, we are not saved by his birth, but by his death and resurrection. That is the gospel. Paul has said so in Verse 6 of this same chapter: "Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all.") No, I do not think that is the meaning of this verse at all.

This does refer to bearing children, but what we need to understand is the word *saved* : "She will be saved through bearing children." Now surely that does not mean that a woman is actually regenerated when she has a child. I could point out a lot of women who are not regenerated who have children; their lives give ample testimony of that. No, we must understand that the word *saved* is used in a different sense than usual here. It does not mean "regenerated," or "born again." It is being used in the sense in which it is also used later in this letter about Timothy himself. In Chapter 4, Verse 16, the apostle says:

Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save [the same word] both yourself and your hearers. {1 Tim 4:16 RSV}

Timothy did not need to be saved in the sense of regeneration because he was already regenerated. Nor could his hearers be regenerated by Timothy's obedience to the faith, because that would be salvation by works. That cannot be the meaning here.

Here the word *saved* means "fulfilled," "to find significance." When used in that same sense, in this word about women, it makes perfect sense. Paul is saying to women, "The role God has given you is not to be the final, authoritative teachers in a church" (that is clear), "but that does not mean you cannot find great significance as Christian women. Your significance, your sense of fulfillment, will come as you bear children and they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."

The interesting thing is, that is exactly what the Greek text says: It says, "they," not "she." It is the editors who

have put in the word, "she." Everywhere, in every version, the Greek text says, "they." It refers to the children. It is simply recognizing that a mother's unique contribution to life is to pour herself and all her values into her children, in order that as they come to manhood and womanhood they touch life and change it because of their mother's helpful influence. The old proverb,

"The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world"

is still true -- both for bad and for good. Abraham Lincoln's famous quotation about his own mother, "All that I am or ever hope to be I owe to my angel mother," is apropos here. She died when he was just a boy, but the impress she made upon his life influenced him throughout his career.

Now Paul is not addressing this passage to non-married women. There are other passages in Scripture which deal with the subject of how a single woman can find fulfillment and significance. Even in that case it involves, oftentimes, qualities of motherhood for women are the mothers of the world. It is a quality that they alone possess. Men cannot do this. It is denied them, just as this matter of making authoritative pronouncements on the final meaning of Scripture is denied to women. Each has his or her own role.

These are differences before God.

When those differences are observed in love and respect and recognition of each other's unique and equal contribution to the value of life, life is joyful and filled with peace and effectiveness and good influence. That is what the apostle is talking about.

The impact of the church upon the world comes about when men and women walk in the character and in the conduct that God has prescribed for them.

Prayer

Thank you, our Father, for the great practicality of Scripture, for the insights it gives us into the nature of our lives. Give us obedient hearts that quickly and readily respond to what you say, hearts that do not argue, fight and resist, but know that your great loving heart has chosen for us, both men and women unique contributions which the other sex cannot make but which are necessary to life and its fulfillment. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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