

## *God's delightful difference*

Sunday 7 February 2010 – Rev Lance Thomas

1 Timothy 2:8-15

Today is the third week in a short preaching series from Paul's first letter to his young prodigy Timothy, who is charged with leadership in a challenging church in the very colourful, 'for want of a better word' city of Ephesus. When I looked at the letter I thought, I am only doing four weeks, I can pick and choose my topics and I should be able to avoid the 'lets not go there passage', of the roles of men and women in public worship. Trying to avoid God is something like the small child's idea of hide and seek if they can't see you, you can't see them. But God can see us and is quite capable of letting even me know that these are his scriptures – no avoiding the hard bits.

So here we go.

'I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent'

I didn't say that. Paul says it.

This is one of the most controversial statements Paul makes in any of his writings and he can be controversial. I wasn't around during the debate in the Presbyterian Church on the ordination of women into both the ministry and the eldership, but I imagine these verses were liberally quoted. I think we should understand them. If for no other reason than we are able to stand on solid ground when we are confronted with the statements that the Christian faith and especially the Apostle Paul were and are anti-women.

Before looking at the verse I want to identify a couple of principles that can help us unpack scripture carefully.

One : The principal of harmony. The belief that when God speaks through the scriptures that he does not contradict himself. Although we appreciate the variety of styles of literature and the theological emphasis of different writings we expect the scriptures to possess an underlying consistency. This doesn't mean we force the text to say what it doesn't say – or manipulate it into denying what it does say, but what it means is that each passage of scripture is interpreted within the total biblical context. What is the rest of the Bible teaching around this subject. So, for example, when we approach these verses about the place of women in the church, we don't isolate these verses from the scriptures' fundamental assertion of the equal value and dignity of men and women. 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them ....' Genesis 2:27. Gods blessing and instruction was to humankind male and female. Equally.

In Galations, from the pen of the same author as the letter to Timothy, we read, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Galations 2:28

There is no difference in the sexes, in terms of being made in the image of God or in our status as God's children through our faith in Christ.

The second principle is the principle of history. That is that God always spoke his Word into particular historical and cultural settings. In the Old Testament, much of what we might call the Mediterranean Middle East. The Gospels into Palestinian Judaism, and the rest of the New Testament into the Greco-Roman world. No word of God was spoken into a cultural vacuum. Every word was spoken into a cultural context. In fact the really cool thing about God's divine revelation is that God didn't sit in some sort of cosmic grandstand from his people and shout instructions from a distance. No, God got down to their level, entered their history, their culture and spoke their language.

This truth creates for us some challenges when it comes to interpreting scripture. Is scripture a mixture of eternal truth which transcends culture, but also a presentation of that truth within the context of a specific history and culture.

How do we distinguish between them? Or more particularly how do we handle the cultural element in scripture?

There are three main approaches people take. One is to enthrone the cultural form and invest it with the same authority which they attribute to the truth it expresses. It's the Word of God, it cannot be tampered with. So the response to the verses we are looking at is to say, men must always raise their arms when in prayer, women must never plait their hair or wear jewellery and under no circumstances may women teach men.

The second approach is the other end of the extreme. Since God's Word is clothed in such ancient cultural dress, although it may have spoken to people long ago, it is completely out of date and irrelevant. Consequently Paul's entire instruction to Timothy about men's prayers and women's adornment and submission must be dismissed. There is virtually nothing worth salvaging, nothing is eternal, everything is merely cultural.

You are probably not surprised to know that I think there is a middle way between the two extremes. Enthroning the cultural presentation with the authority of the truth it seeks to express, leaves us I think, with absurdities that contradict the spirit and harmony of the Gospel. On the other hand just loosely dismissing large chunks of teaching because they are expressed in cultural veneer, I think, easily leads to dismissing any aspect of scripture that we are uncomfortable with, because in reality most scripture comes with a cultural overlay. The middle way is to discern in scripture between God's essential revelation which is changeless and it's cultural expression which is changeable. The goal then becomes to preserve the changeless and re-express it in our contemporary culture.

An example of this is Jesus' command to wash each other's feet. We don't obey this literally and go around washing people's feet, but neither do we dismiss it as having no relevance to us. We discern the truth that no service will be beneath us if we love one another. In today's reality we gladly wash the dishes or clean the toilet.

So what would this middle way look like when applied to the verses we are looking at this morning. There are three instructions in the verses and they all relate to the conduct of public worship. Men and their prayers, women and their adornment and women in their relation to men.

'I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.' The lifting of holy hands was a demonstration of coming before the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart. But it is useless to spread out our hands to God in prayer if they are defiled with sin. As for anger and quarrelling it is inappropriate to approach God in prayer if we are harbouring resentment or bitterness against people.

Holiness, love and peace are indispensable to prayer but bodily posture and gestures in prayer are cultural. Whether we stand, sit, bow, kneel or fall on our faces are of little consequence but holiness and love and peace are of utmost importance.

The second instruction is also quite easy to distinguish between the eternal truth and the cultural veneer. 'Women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.'

Ephesus had, at the centre of its public life, two large pagan, goddess worshipping temples. The goddess Diana and the goddess Aphrodite. Both of these huge temples were supported by the income of hundreds of temple prostitutes who were distinguished by the way they braided their hair, particularly with gold and pearls woven into their hair as well as worn as jewellery. The role of women in worship practise of the day was either non-existent, as in Judaism or as objects of their sexuality, with the role of serving men. This was pretty much the case in society as well. Of course there were exceptions. Women have always managed to break the shackles of cultural instructions and prominent wealthy women of the day, not just in Ephesus, were often distinguished by the price tag of the clothes they wore. The impression I get is that the Oscars red carpet dresses have nothing on the price tag of first century high fashion.

The new religion on the block, in Christianity, treated women and gave freedoms to women, that were outrageously different. Paul's instruction is to use that freedom responsibly. To be careful in what is accentuated and why, and the message that is given by what is worn and how a woman's beauty is enhanced. The detail of braiding of hair adorned with pearl and gold is an instruction, a detail for first century Ephesus. Modesty, decency, propriety in a place of worship pretty much a universal guideline. Not forgetting that what is modest, decent and in propriety will change from culture to culture. Although the one thing Paul might suggest doesn't change is the attractiveness and enhancement of beauty by good deeds. I kind of wish Paul had stopped there. But he didn't. 'A woman shall learn in quietness and submission, not teach or have authority over men.' The easy option is to say that this is purely cultural, belongs in the first century and has nothing of value for us. The quietness and the teaching thing belong in the worship service of first century Ephesus. Evidently worship in Ephesus was noisy, confrontational and chaotic and the inappropriate exercise of a new religious freedom by women was part of it. But I want to suggest that there is something in the submission and authority instruction that we don't want to lose. We need to recognise that we live in a cultural context also. That our culture has fairly recently seen the elevation of rights and freedoms, especially for women. And it has not come without conflict. And in the conflict, the word submission has been identified with weakness, and authority with the abuse of power. But outside our cultural context, submission is about mutual acceptance of each other's perspective. It's not all about me! And authority is less about power and more about responsibility. The buck stops here. Paul uses mutual acceptance and responsibility to highlight the difference between male and female. The biblical perspective is that men and women are different. Our culture has tried to blur that difference. And our liberated women at their worst look a lot like men at their worst. The inebriated, foul-mouthed, aggressive individual being locked up in a cell on New Year's Eve is just as likely to be a young woman as a young man. Perhaps, with better masks, that phenomenon seems to run through into business, politics and other areas of society as well. But the biblical perspective is that men and women, male and female - equal in God's created order, equal before God in Christ, at their best and worst, are created differently. The body of Christ is at its best when we recognise that others have strengths I lack, and it sometimes appears to be gender determined strengths, and submit to those. The body of Christ is at its best when we recognise that we have strengths, maybe gendered determined, and accept responsibility to exercise those strengths. I am confident I have not addressed all the difficulties of these verses, but I hope I have shown that all scripture, even the hard bits, are worthy of being searched for understanding.