

Women and Men: Guarding Our Sacred Partnership in Ministry
Text: 1 Timothy 2: 11-15; Genesis 1:26-27; Galatians 3:26-28

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This was a sermon dedicated to the memory of Dr. Gilbert W. Stafford, Professor of Christian Theology, who was a colleague, mentor and friend. Dr. Stafford died March 30, 2008.

“God will never bless this church as long as there are women in leadership”. When those words echoed through the sanctuary during an annual business meeting you could have heard a pin drop.

From where I stood I could see the facial expressions of the congregation. Some heads snapped in the direction of the one making the comment as if to say, “Who would make such an archaic remark?” Other people stared straight ahead. They knew why women were in leadership but they held their breath hoping there would not be division in the church. Still other folks glanced at me with raised eyebrows, “Why *were* we electing women to serve as congregational leaders?”

My response was short probably because I was shocked by the unsolicited statement. “Our church tradition has always recognized gifted women. This is not an item for discussion at the annual business meeting but I would be happy to talk with you about your concern at a later time.” I swallowed hard. Ballots were marked. The business meeting concluded.

The next week my outspoken parishioner made an appointment to see me. His yellow pad was filled with notes. He said, “Pastor I really like you and the church but!” Have you ever had anyone say ... I like you but? What follows usually mutes the “I like you” part of the statement. He said, “I think our church is wrong about women in ministry. If we continue in disobedience, I fear we will lose the blessing of God and our church will die”.

Pastor, he went on to say, “everybody knows women are inferior to men when it comes to leadership”. His matter of fact approach reminded me of the position of the church in the Middle Ages when it was said that women lacked “eminence,”¹ For example Thomas Aquinas advanced this eminence idea based partly upon the science of Aristotle. Aristotle suggested that male semen was white and dominant and female menstruation was red and inferior.² Therefore men were by nature superior to women. In the Middle Ages nearly everyone accepted as fact that men were by nature superior and should lead in the home, church and government. But I thought to myself, “We are not in the Middle Ages anymore.”

I said to my guest, “I disagree. Look around you and you will see women, when given opportunity, accomplishing great things in every field of endeavor. This is not surprising to me for in the beginning God created them in His own image, male and female he created them and told **them** to rule over the earth.”³

“But Pastor you have to admit that Jesus chose only men to be his Apostles”. Yes Jesus, in a patriarchal culture, chose only Jewish men.⁴ However, if we use the bar of Jewish maleness the vast majority of Christian leaders are disqualified to serve.

Pastor, this is serious, “you are called to guard the truth. The Bible clearly states **“a woman is not permitted to teach or have authority over a man”**”⁵. Yes, that is what 1 Timothy 2:12 clearly states but what it means is not so clear. For we read in the same paragraph (2:15) it also clearly states that **“she (woman) will be saved through childbearing”**”.

Do we really believe women are saved by having children? What about “by grace we are saved through faith?”⁶ What about women who never have children? Are they disqualified from the heavenly prize? We must be careful not to build eternal doctrines on disputed passages. What is clear is that the vast majority of verses in the Old and New Testament describe women in leadership roles while less than a handful limit their service.⁷

He left my office unconvinced and eventually left the church because of our biblical position on women in leadership. But one thing he said stuck with me. Pastor you are called to guard the truth.

¹ John Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 101.

² Ibid., 103.

³ Genesis 2:27

⁴ Randal Huber, *Called, Equipped and No Place to Go: Women Pastors and the Church* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, 2003), 47.

⁵ 1 Timothy 2:12

⁶ Ephesians 2:8,9

⁷ Catherine Clark Kroeger and Richard Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 33.

When he left my study I opened my bible and began to reflect upon 1 Timothy 2:11-15. As the letter opens the author of the Pastorals reminds Timothy **“to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than divine training that is known by faith.”**⁸ False teachers were in the church. Therefore, Timothy at the close of the letter is told to **“guard what has been entrusted to you.”**⁹

While 1 Timothy does not define the content of these myths, genealogies and speculations there is extra biblical evidence suggesting an early Gnostic teaching was infiltrating the church in Ephesus. For years the temple of Artemis had been a center for the worship of the feminine. “Cerinthus, a first-century Gnostic in Ephesus, promoted the worship of ‘Authentia’ as the Primal Deity from which all else derived.”¹⁰ The Pastoral letters were written to guard against these myths and speculations that were spreading from house to house like wild fire. Instructions were given to men and women but more lengthy instructions were given to women, such as:

- **“Let a woman learn in silence with full submission”**¹¹ The shocking thing, about this verse when heard within either a Jewish or Greek context, was not **‘in silence with full submission’** but the imperative **‘let a woman learn’**. This ancient formula¹² ‘in silence and submission’ did not mean a woman should not speak but that a learner should come peacefully under the truth that was being taught.¹³ There is nothing in the verse that suggests a woman should be in submission to man but rather she is to be in submission to the truth.
- The instruction continues, **“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she is to keep silent”**.¹⁴ The verb “I permit no” is in *the present continual tense*. In other words Paul does not say, “I will not /never permit, but rather, I am not (now) permitting.”¹⁵ This is a huge difference. For example, there is a difference if your employer would say, “I will not/never permit employees to have a pay increase” over against saying, “I am not now permitting employees to have a pay increase.”

⁸ 1 Timothy 1:3-5;

⁹ 1 Timothy 5:20

¹⁰ Kroeger, 101.

¹¹ 1 Timothy 2:11

¹² Kroeger, 32.

¹³ Perhaps the modern formula “every head bowed and every eye closed” might be a similar formula to proceed reverently.

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 2:12.

¹⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Vol. 1* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 226.

Scholars such as Witherington and Wijngaards conclude that women were temporarily told to stop teaching until they clearly understood apostolic instruction. Wijngaards drawing upon church tradition affirms that for 900 years women taught and were involved in all aspects of Christian ministry.¹⁶

Richard and Catherine Kroeger drill deeper into the text and offer an alternative translation. They remind us the infinitives “to teach” (*didaskein*) and “to have authority” (*authenthein*) are crucial in unlocking the meaning of this passage. For instance wherever to teach (*didaskein*) is found in the Pastorals it always has to do with content rather than mere pedagogical activity.¹⁷ To teach (*didaskein*) has to do either with truth or error.

The infinitive ‘to have authority’ (*authenthein*) is only used once in the entire Bible (what is called a *hapax legomina*). This begs the question what was the author intending in selecting this unique word over against more commonly used words for authority or power (*kurieuein* or *exousizein*)? Possible meanings for *authenthein* outside the canon include “to be responsible for murder; to dominate; to usurp power; and, to claim authorship.”¹⁸

In addition the double negative couplet, “not/nor” (*ouk, oude*) are often used to link a thought together. The second negative usually confirms or strengthens the first. For example in Romans we read “**there is none (*ouk*) righteous no not (*oude*) one” (Rom.3:10).**

The Kroegers’ suggest if we translate *authenthein* as ‘to claim authorship’ instead of ‘to have authority’ the verse could legitimately read, **“I do not allow a woman to teach nor to proclaim herself author of man.”**¹⁹ I. Howard Marshall agrees when he writes, “it is therefore more likely that the verb (*authenthein*) characterizes the nature of the teaching rather than the role of women in church leadership in general.”²⁰ With this interpretation the remaining verses seek to correct the wrongful notion that woman was the author of man. Thus returning to the text, we can follow the remaining argument in the Pastorals:

- **“For Adam was formed first then Eve** is the correct order of Genesis 2:7. However, being created first does not imply superiority, for if this is true the birds of the air and fish of the sea would be superior to human beings since they were created prior.

¹⁶ Wijngaards, Chapter 9.

¹⁷ Kroeger, 81.

¹⁸ Ibid., 81-84.

¹⁹ Ibid., 103.

²⁰ Witherington III, 228.

- **“And Adam was not deceived”** “A tenet of Gnosticism was that Adam was deceived, tricked into believing that he was born first.”²¹ But the correction is he was not duped. **“But the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”** Again the Gnostic contention was that Eve was superior to Adam and was without fault. The author of Genesis implicates both Adam and Eve; both were deceived by the serpent and banished from the garden.
- **“Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.** Much speculation has been made about the “she and they” of this verse and I will not enter into the debate. But once again a tenet of Gnosticism instructed women to abstain from childbearing and seek the more enlightened, child free, path of salvation. Thus the pastoral corrective is to affirm that childbearing is a noble thing and does not disqualify women from salvation **“as long as they continue in faith, love, holiness and modesty”**.

John Wijngaards is not an ornithologist but rather a theologian. In one of his books he writes about the birthing habits of the Cuckoo bird.²² It appears that Cuckoo birds are found of *laying* their eggs but not *hatching* their eggs. The practice of the cuckoo bird is this: after laying their eggs they look around for other bird nests that have similar eggs in regards to color and size (warblers, sparrows, wrens, etc.). When for example the Warbler leaves her nest the Cuckoo bird places her egg in the nest of the Warbler. The Warbler returns and sits on the nest until all the eggs are hatched.

A strange thing happens when the Cuckoo egg is hatched. The baby Cuckoo bird begins finding and discarding other birds and eggs within the nest. There is a tiny concaved groove in the neck of the cuckoo bird which permits them to excavate objects in the nest. When the mother Warbler returns to feed her babies eventually there is only one large gapping mouth demanding food. The sad story is the mother Warbler keeps on feeding the intruder even though the much larger Cuckoo bird is not her own.

When I read the Cuckoo hatching account I had two insights. One, if I could speak bird fluently I would say to all Warblers, Sparrows and Wrens...**“GUARD YOUR NEST! Don’t hatch and feed a slothful predator that places eggs in your nest. And do not feed the stranger that destroys your young. Guard your nest.”**

The second insight is more of a metaphor for those who have embraced women in leadership. **“GUARD YOUR PARTNERSHIP. Do not allow unexamined traditions to embed themselves into the thought life of the church. Rather proactively and boldly affirm all persons as equally created in the image of God to lead.”** Remember..., **“So in Jesus Christ you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized**

²¹ Kroeger, 122.

²² Wijngaards, 5.

into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”²³

Jennifer Gooch is an art student at Carnegie Mellon University. She is from south Texas and discovered northern winters to be extreme. During her first winter she observed many single lost gloves on the ground. She came to believe that a lone glove is useless without its mate. For her “one lost glove” became a symbol for a sense of disconnect.

Out of her passion and creativity she developed a wall space in her apartment where these lost gloves could be displayed. A friend helped her to launch a website www.onecoldhand.com²⁴ where lost gloves could be displayed. Her mission is to unite the lost and found. Her mission was borne out of the value that “neither the loser nor the finder benefits.”²⁵ Two gloves are needed to function properly.

Onecoldhand.com can be a reunion metaphor for women and men to reclaim their equal partnership in Christian ministry.

Admittedly, there are traditions in the Christian church that do not support women in leadership. My purpose is not to criticize or demonize any of them. My purpose is to guard a theological position that traces its roots to creation and anchors its soul in scripture, tradition, reason and experience. I want to guard a truth that affirms leadership based on giftedness not gender. I want to encourage the church to guard this partnership, not as a relic of the past but as a reality for the future. The fields are white unto harvest but workers are few. Whom shall we send to lead?

Women and men guard your sacred partnership!

²³ Galatians 3:26-28

²⁴ http://www.edu/news/archive/2007/November/nov_28_gloveproject.shtml, accessed March 3, 2008.

²⁵ Ibid, March 3.