

GOD'S WORD AND WOMEN IN OFFICE

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For a brief summary of what God's Word says about women in ruling office we need to limit ourselves to a number of important scripture references. First we have to deal with certain rather clear sounding rules that the Apostle Paul on behalf of Christ offers us (cf. 1 Cor. 14:37, "What I am writing you is a command of the Lord"). In 1 Corinthians 14:34 we learn that women should remain silent and not speak during the assemblies. They must be in submission as is stated in the law. In 1 Timothy 2:11-15 we also read that a woman should obediently and humbly let herself be educated. It is not permitted that they themselves teach or have authority over men. This is yet another rule that Paul does not just dream up, but that is based on the account of Genesis 2 and 3. Along with other regulations, it concerns the question "how to behave in the house of God" (1 Tim. 3:15).

On the surface, it seems that the answer is plain and simple. However one might think about finer points of application, a woman should never hold a ruling office in Christ's church. And indeed one will need to come with good arguments if he still wants to plead for women in ruling office and at the same time desires to keep showing the highest respect, reverence and obedience to these words of Christ's emissary, Paul.

Besides these biblically motivated regulations on the activities of women in the church, the New Testament also pays attention to the full participation of women and men in the riches of Christ's redemption. Baptism is also administered to women by Paul (Acts 16:14-15). And is it not the same Paul who in Galatians 3:28 says that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female? We are all one in Christ Jesus. Nationality, social status or gender have nothing to say about whether a person is allowed to belong to Christ. Participation in the redemption in Christ is a matter of faith.

If we respect Paul for being Christ's envoy, we must not interpret his letters as if he was suffering from a split personality disorder. This is done, for example, when texts such as Gal. 3:28 (no man or woman in Christ) are blown up into a kind of theological and social programme. One then looks with embarrassment at the so-called 'silence texts'. How could the Paul of Gal. 3:28 ever write something like 1 Cor. 14:34 or 1 Tim. 2: 11-15?

When struggling with 1 Tim. 2 such interpreters sometimes try to discredit Paul's argument by reading Genesis 2 and 3 differently than he does. Although they move further away from Paul when they argue like this, such an approach gives the *appearance* of being genuinely engaged with God's Holy Word. It is only an *appearance* because one is then essentially saying that God was not able to restrain his own emissaries and could not prevent them from dealing with his previously given Word in an inappropriate (read: *wrong*) way. Although not specifically stated, it is actually the doctrine of divine inspiration that is at stake. Can we read the New Testament as the authoritative Word of God or not – even though written by different men with their varied style and language?

If we do believe that all Scripture ought to be read as the authoritative Word of God, then this confession entails reading Genesis 2 and 3 with a certain pair of glasses. That is, the glasses – in this case – of the Apostle Paul.

Let us then look at Genesis 2 in this way. In Genesis 2 we read how God created Adam ("man") and formed him from the dust of the earth (v.7). From both the grammar and the course of the chapter it is clear that this "man" is a male creature. This man is put in the garden of Eden to work it and watch over it. Only then is it noted that it is not good that he remains alone. God wants to make a "helper" for him that suits him (v.18). It is noteworthy that once God has said this, he first brings all sorts of animals to Adam. Adam shows his dominion over the animals by giving them names. In the context of the Bible, naming implies that one indicates certain characteristics by the names. In this process of discovery Adam will surely have found animals that could serve him as helpers (dogs, horses or cows), but no helper that was "bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh", no helper "suitable for him". This is the moment when God builds a female being from Adam's rib. In her, he finally finds a "helper suitable for him". This story shows that from the outset God created people as man and woman, in accordance with what is stated in the summary in Genesis 1. Together, man and woman represent God's image on earth. Genesis 2, however, shows a distinction. The woman is

made to serve Adam as an indispensable helper. Among other things, the close of Genesis 2 emphasises that the woman will be his help in reproduction. While Adam was able to work the garden alone, he could not accomplish reproduction by himself. The context of Genesis 2 shows that it is especially in view of this reproduction that reference is made to the woman as an “appropriate helper” (cf. 1 Tim. 2:15). This accent (which of course does not rule out other forms of helping) is confirmed by the way that God later in Genesis 3 specifies the curse to man and woman. For the man the curse especially has to do with working the soil (3:17-19) and for his “helper”, the woman, the curse has mainly to do with reproduction (3:16).

When Paul reasons from the order of the ‘forming’¹ of man and woman and concludes that there is a relationship of authority, he is clearly thinking of this account from Genesis 2 and not of the six days of the work of creation in Genesis 1. It is too easy, and it is also irrelevant, to discredit Paul – as is sometimes done – with the remark that the previously created animals should then have authority over man. Paul is not talking about a general principle (the one that is older always has greater authority), but the order of the formation of the first man and woman. The man was formed and had to work the garden. Later he was given a woman as helper. Nowhere is it said that the man is a “helper” for the woman. Even more so when Adam shows his leadership by also providing her with a name, a name that characterises her as the mother of all living (cf. 2:19 and 3:20).

It is sometimes said that Genesis 3:16 indicates that the battle of the sexes is a result of the fall. It is suggested that any talk of “authority relationship” is also partly determined by the fall. Genesis 3:16 would mean that the husband wins in this battle of the sexes, but his dominance is a result of sin. In light of this interpretation of Genesis 2 it would at least have to be formulated in a more nuanced way (as is usually done with this interpretation). Emphasis is then placed on the way men, after the fall, tend to dominate women and abuse the authority that may be granted to them. Another interpretation, however, is also common.² In this case one notes the parallel between Gen. 3:16 and Gen. 4:7. If we put them literally side by side, we see the following:

Gen. 3:16b (God is speaking to the woman)
And to your husband is your desire, but he will / should rule over you.

Gen. 4:7b (sin lies in wait for Cain ...)
And to you is his desire, but you should / must rule over him.

In these texts, the “desire” is an attempt to dominate another unlawfully. The second half of the sentence indicates who should have the leadership. Sin desires to dominate Cain, but he should rule over sin. Similarly, the woman is trying to dominate the man unlawfully, but he should rule over her. The word “rule”, as so often in the Bible, can be interpreted in a positive sense (cf. Gen. 1:18; 2 Sam. 23:3).

Whichever interpretation one finds convincing, nothing stands in the way of the indicated relationship of authority in Genesis 2.

We then move on to what Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:34. Women should remain silent in the assemblies, not speak, but remain subordinate as the law says. This rule cannot be undermined by a plea to the praying and prophesying women in 1 Cor. 11.³ Prayer and prophecy were in those days certainly not limited to worship services. Moreover, Paul only starts to discuss the worship services in Corinth in 1 Cor. 11:17 (the discussion first concerns Lord’s Supper celebrations in the afternoon, 1 Cor. 11: 17ff, and then the liturgical morning assemblies, 1 Corinthians 12-14.). This rule is also crystal clear, without limitations. We are dealing here with a general command for silence. Paul calls it a shame when women break this command for silence. It is obvious that Paul means that all true believers should experience it as a disgrace if a woman should speak during a worship service. This especially because he has just said that this rule can also be found in “the law”. A few verses earlier, in 1 Cor. 14:21, Paul referred to “the law” which he then cites as Isaiah 28:11-12. He uses the word “law” here (as was customary at the time) as a collective term for the Old Testament (cf. Jn. 10:34). Exactly what Paul refers to with the word “law” in 1 Cor. 14:34 is the subject of debate (many think of Genesis 3:16, see the explanation above). The simplest solution is the explanation Paul himself gives in the related passage in his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 2: 11-15). According to Van Bruggen’s chronology, this letter was written only a few months after 1 Corinthians.⁴

That brings us straight to this text. A number of preliminary remarks should, however, be made. Firstly, there

1 Paul uses here the verb from the Septuagint of Gen. 2:7. Adam was indeed not created ‘out of nothing’, but formed from earth.

2 See, for example, Susan T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 66-69.

3 See R. D. Anderson, *1 Korintiërs, Orde op zaken in een jonge stadskerk*, 2e ed. (Kampen: Kok, 2012), 148, 215.

4 J. van Bruggen, *Paulus: Pionier voor de Messias van Israël* (Kampen: Kok, 2001) 266-67.

are scarcely any polemics to be seen in 1 Timothy 2. Paul writes in a calm way and proceeds to give commands to Timothy for regulating church life. When attempts are made to paint all kinds of background scenarios against which Paul would be reacting, this must be seen as reading an interpretation *into* the text and not deriving the interpretation *out* of it. Because of this, when we deal with verses 11-15, we ought to come to an explanation whereby Paul's words regarding women concern *women* and not some other unspecified problem or situation. For example, when verse 11 is explained in such a way that the rebellious dominant women in Ephesus should keep quiet, we are faced with an exhortation which could just as easily be directed at rebellious dominant men. Paul's words, however, give no reason to suggest that he is trying to appease a particular situation. He wants to calmly discuss the respective roles of women and men in the worship service. And because this is the point here – men ought to pray, women ought to pay attention to their clothes, women ought to remain silent, men are to be chosen to the offices – the explanation of verse 11 should also have something specific to say about women.

It is good to first have clearly in mind what Paul actually wants from women. A literal translation of 1 Tim. 2:11 reads: *A woman should learn in silence and all submissiveness*. Women must therefore not teach or exercise authority over other men (v.12). Do men then never have to be taught? If we want to make fun of Paul, we could conclude that men never have to submit to the authority of other men, nor need to be taught by other men. That is clearly not the point here, of course. And that can at the same time be a clue to what Paul wants to say here, namely, the *manner* in which education at church is received.⁵ As is apparent from 1 Cor. 14, men engaged in conversation with each other during the service about what was taught, in order to learn by way of posing questions.⁶ Such a conversational manner of learning did not stand in the way of their due *submission* to the teacher or prophet. In order to make clear that this method of learning is not intended for women, Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2 that women should let themselves be taught “in silence”, which means, “in *all* submission”.⁷ Paul gives two reasons for this difference between women and men in the method of learning. The first has already been discussed and is the authority relationship that Genesis 2 clearly shows from the order of the formation of man and woman. The second reason in v.14 can generate a false impression from the new Dutch Bible translation (NBV), where we read (translated): *And Adam was not deceived, but the woman; they broke God's commandment*. A literal rendering makes Paul's intent clearer: *And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived fell into transgression*. Passages such as Rom. 5: 12ff show clearly that Paul ascribes the ultimate responsibility for the Fall to Adam. What he is doing here is to underline the *nature* of the Fall. His concern is not *that* Eve fell into sin, but *the way in which* she fell, namely, by “deception” – in accordance with the confession of the woman in Genesis 2:13. Perhaps he means to say that women are generally more easily deceived (partly due to a constitution made for giving birth to and care for young children, for example, a different hormonal system than men). Yet he does not specifically say this. He may just as easily have intended to say that women after the fall should show appropriate shame for the way their arch-mother fell into sin. Women show this appropriate shame by applying their submission to education in church in a stricter way than men. And, obviously, by taking no part in the giving of such teaching or other forms of authority in the church.

It should be clear that for Christ's ambassador Paul, ruling office in the church remains closed to women.

5 That Paul is concerned with education at church is clear from 1 Tim. 3:15 (see the beginning of this article).

6 On this point see R. D. Anderson, *1 Korintiërs, Orde op zaken in een jonge stadskerk*, 2e ed. (Kampen: Kok, 2012), 211-218.

7 It is interesting that in our own tradition even the men (outside of ministers and sermon-readers etc.) learn “in silence” and “in all submission”. This, of course, has everything to do with the larger size of church communities whereby such question and answer sessions are quite impractical.