

OpenTheo

#152 - Can women lead in church? Why does 1 Timothy tell women to 'be silent'?

January 12, 2023



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers questions on what the New Testament says about the role of women in church leadership. Does 1 Tim 2:13-15 forbid women from preaching? What does he make of complementarian vs egalitarian theology? How does he treat passages such as Ephesians 5: 22 'wives submit to your husband'? First broadcast in 2019.

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Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast. Hello, welcome back to the show, brought to you in partnership with NT Wright Online and SBCK Tom's UK publisher. I'm Justin Briley and I hope you enjoyed Tom's talks.

Over the last few weeks from the Oxford Conference on Reimagining Global Mission, thank you to listener Mark Robertson who tweeted his appreciation for them, particularly a quote from Tom, "The human vocation is to add the word because to the inarticulate praise of the rest of creation." We'll be lining up some fresh questions from you in forthcoming shows, so do register at PremierUnbelievable.com to receive our newsletter

and get that link that allows you to submit a question to Tom. If you can leave us a rating and a review on your podcast provider, that helps others to discover this show. Onto today's program, this is going to be a replay from early 2019 when Tom answered questions on what the New Testament says about the role of women in church leadership, does 1 Timothy 2 forbid women from preaching? What does he make of the complementary versus egalitarian debate? How does he treat passages such as Ephesians 5:22 saying wives submit to your husbands? I hope you enjoyed this show from the archives.

It was great to be back with you Tom for another edition of the podcast. This is a particular issue that we're going to be digging into today that has divided lots of parts of the church, particularly in the last century or so, women leadership. Just before we get into some of those questions, it would be interesting to know from your perspective, as an Anglican, which has only in the relatively recent past begun to ordain women and so on, even more recently into the roles of bishops and so on.

Has your thinking changed on this over the years in any way? Oh yes, because of course I grew up in a church where clergy were male, and the most that a woman could do when I was growing up in, I was born in 48 so in the 50s and 60s, was to be a deaconess, which was like a deacon but probably not actually presiding at services except occasionally in rural churches when there wasn't a vicar around as it were. And there were plenty of women doing plenty of things. One of my answers was actually an Anglican nun and very active in the church and then a deeply prayerful person of great personal spiritual leadership and people used to go to her for a council and so on.

So I've been used to women taking quite an interesting role rather than just passive but not being ordained. I suppose I started thinking more seriously about it when we were in Canada in the early 80s because I was in Montreal and Montreal had just decided they were going to ordain women and that was quite a challenge for me and it forced me to go back and look at the various passages and particularly some of the ones we'll probably be talking about in a minute. And I came out with the view that though I couldn't necessarily explain all the details of all the verses that are sometimes quoted again, there was a very strong groundswell of scriptural affirmation.

In other words, this wasn't just, oh I had seen women doing it and realized it was okay. There may have been a bit of that kind of softening me up, making me ready for the fresh scriptural awareness. And then it's basically all gone from there but I've had friends who have thought this and then thought that and have changed their mind this way and some who have changed their mind that way.

So I'm very much aware of debates continuing. And do you find yourself still able to work in concord with people who maybe do hold a very different position in that? Well, I would certainly but they wouldn't necessarily say that when I was Bishop of Durham for

instance there was a group of clergy who because I was going to ordain women could not regard me as their Bishop because they were in a different, what we call a different integrity. How you can have two integrity is still quite tricky.

But I've always believed that this isn't something you should divide the church over and that as with some other contentious issues, the aim should be to live in such a way that doesn't make demands on one another's conscience but may make demands on one another's charity. And that was hammered out by the Church of South India in the 1940s when they wanted to bring together Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians etc. And they would live for a while with demands on one another's charity but without putting demands on one another's conscience that is really, really important.

And so that's what I've tried to model and as with everything else it isn't always easy, doesn't always work the way you would like. Well let's go to some of the questions. Abby in Bournemouth asks you know a sort of general question on this front.

What does the New Testament really say about the role of women and leadership in the church? Is it biblical for a woman to lead a congregation? Is it biblical for a woman to preach to a congregation of both men and women? And Abby's setting up some of the traditional sort of points at which people differ over exactly where a woman's authority to lead and preach occur in an election setting. As with many other things I want to go to the resurrection, I want to go to the resurrection stories of Jesus in the first light of Easter Day. Actually you know without the resurrection of Jesus everything falls apart anyway there is no Christianity.

And within that culture the idea that the prime witnesses to the most important event in the whole story would be women in tears is so counterintuitive that as a historian I have to say nobody would ever make up that story. Interestingly in 1 Corinthians 15 when Paul quotes what is now the shaped up and polished tradition the women have disappeared already by the early 50s. Here's our tradition and we know that people aren't going to believe us if we say he appeared first to these women but Matthew, Mark, Luke and John it's all very clear the first person to see the risen Jesus were the women and particularly the first people to be told to tell other people that Jesus is alive again, Mary Magdalene and the others.

Now all Christian ministry flows from the announcement that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now the Lord of the world. And this is just a cultural revolution that Jesus had up till then chosen 12 men who will let him down in various ways. He now transforms that and this is part of the newness of new creation it seems to me by saying now actually this extraordinary explosive message is so subversive that the best people to take it are strange women who know one's going to believe and indeed the disciples themselves don't but they were telling the truth.

And it seems to me we need to inhabit that story and that way of looking at that story

and say so was this just a flash in the pan and was this just well Jesus you know had a special thing about his mother or Mary Magdalene or whatever but after that it all went and the answer is absolutely not. Read Romans 16. Now of course most people studying Romans find it hard to get to chapter 8 let alone 11 or let alone 16 but Romans 16 is explosive Paul greets all these church leaders in Rome many of whom are women who are church leaders in their own right one of whom is an apostle he says so junior and there's been a huge attempt to try to make out this as Junia as a man but the scholarship is quite clear this is a female name and she is an apostle for Paul that means somebody who has seen the risen Jesus and is thereby commissioned to be an authorized representative and here's the crunch.

The first woman mentioned in Romans 16 is the bearer of the letter to Rome. Now if you're Paul and you know in your bones you have just written a letter which is the most explosive piece of theological writing you can imagine. Who are you going to give it to take it to be read under Caesar's nose in Rome? Well presumably some strong man.

No a deacon woman from the church in Ken Kraya. We assume she's an independent business woman Phoebe and she's on the way to Rome and what we know about the way letters worked in the ancient world was if you sent a letter via a friend or somebody the chances are you can't prove this the chances are they will be the one to read it out they might well be the one to explain it to people who I mean faced with Romans we'd have a thousand I'd have a thousand questions so Phoebe tell us what so the probability is that the first person to expound Paul's letter to the Romans was a woman a deacon from the church in Ken Kraya. I want to say get used to it guys you know this is explosive but it's the sort of thing that happens when new creation is going forward and to row back from there and to say well you know Paul didn't really mean that and so now we've I then want to say what are the forces in our culture today particularly I have to say in America which are forcing some churches and some people to fasten on one or two verses from elsewhere to say oh no no we can't have women doing this and that and the other because that's a highly highly selective reading of scripture and as with all other theological answers the best place to start is with the resurrection of Jesus and then everything that flows out from there.

So in summary in a sense to Abbe's question here is it biblical for a woman to preach to lead a congregation of men and women you would say on balance yes I would miss out on balance I would just say yes it is it is biblical yes there are particulars I mean you want me to get to well let's talk about that because that comes up in the next question Lisa in California interestingly two women asking these questions first Timothy to 13 to 15 though you could expand beyond that can you explain what these verses have to do or to say specifically about women teaching if they do at all and specifically what your thoughts are on verse 15 in particular would you like to read that from? Yeah well there's a few things to say and let me say I've written a piece on this which is printed in my book surprise by scripture and so all I can do here is summarize some of the arguments

I've set it out more fully and indeed in Paul for everyone the pastoral epistles there's a chunk on it there and those overlap inevitably. The first thing to say is that in verses 8 and 9 and 10 Paul is saying men and women don't go with the stereotypes the men must lift up holy hands without getting angry and having arguments in other words men we all know about testosterone just now your Christians learn to deal with that and don't be all sort of power brokers and so on women don't think that your life is defined by having an elaborate hairdo or by having jewelry that just plays into the idea that women are the pretty little things the decoration on the side while we men are doing the fighting as it were so he's saying let's get rid of the stereotypes and learn a wise way of being human which avoids those in other words it isn't that he's crossed with women for wearing jewels it's that don't get trapped in the thinking that that's all that it means to be a woman to be a pretty bit of decoration on the side and then he says this is my second main point a woman should learn in peace in all submissiveness but the idea the word *manthanetto* let her learn is the same root from which we get *mafetes* disciple and *hesukiya* is what you have if you're a student you have the leisure to study the word scholar actually comes from having leisure to study and it looks to me as though this is similar to what you have in Luke chapter 10 where Jesus is in the home of Mary and Martha where Mary, shock horror is not in the back room where the women should be doing the cooking she is in the front room sitting with the men disciples which means she is in training to be herself a learner and then it's like somebody sitting at the feet of a rabbi is soon related to be a rabbi themselves I remember when I had Paula Gooda on my unbelievable podcast discussing this with Francesca Stavra Kapula who takes a view that it's all inherently sexist and patriarchal and Paula was keen to say of course it came out of a very patriarchal culture so we're bound to see aspects of that but pointed out that in this specific instance simply saying women should learn exactly was exactly quite quite radical in his day and age it is and women would regularly ever since Aristotle who saw women as a deficient form of men actually women were regarded as not that sort of thing and this of course has gone on in the western world and still in some circles does to this day but then the crucial thing then I think is the possibility and it is only a possibility that this is written to the context of Ephesus and what we know about Ephesus in the first century is that as we know in Acts the great temple in Ephesus is Diana or Artemis in Greek and the cult of Artemis which has this vast temple one of the wonders of the world is a female only cult and various people have argued this isn't my idea but I think it has some mileage that actually what Paul is opposing here is the idea well of course we in Ephesus know that religion is basically a female thing so if there are any men there then the women is going to have to take over the leadership from them and because we want to hold our heads up like the Artemis priestesses where men aren't allowed to look in and this would then be verse 12 would then be a rebuke to that that women should not usurp or try to take over authority from men now I want to say I don't know that that's what that means but the key Greek word in the middle of the authentic is a very strange word which you can look at up in the dictionary it's got about 12 different meanings one of which is actually to murder I mean it covers a huge range

and then the question about the men there is does this mean women shouldn't be usurping authority from any man or from their husbands or they shouldn't be teaching their husbands as though there's a husband wife thing going on here as though yes women teachers fine but maybe not if it's the I really don't know on that and then the argument about Adam and Eve rather like the one in first Corinthians 11 if you read it out for us sorry yes Adam was made first and then Eve and Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and got herself into trouble and parabasic a gun and she she became in transgression I should make clear for those who can't see but you're actually reading from the original Greek here sorry it's just some people might assume why is he sort of questioning how to do you I just want to make you're not reading from an English Bible at this point you're translating like this but I mean so so for Paul this is a flicker of the Adam and Eve story right and it's I've heard it expounded both ways I've heard well Adam was not deceived but he jolly well sinned whereas the woman was deceived so that's all the more fault for Adam but you could read it as that Adam was above that sort of thing but in the story Adam did eat so it's not quite clear to me or not at the moment the different ways of possibly reading that and then verse 15 which was specified that the woman will be saved through childbirth if she continues in faith and love and and holiness with wisdom the the point there is that in Genesis 3 there is this warning to the woman that you will have great pain in childbirth which goes with the warning to the man that the ground will bring four thorns and thistles in you you'll have hard work digging it and so it seems to be Paul saying okay that was the Eve problem the Eve story but that doesn't mean that all is now lost that Eve will be saved through childbirth it doesn't mean she'll only be saved if she gives birth lots of children it means that the apparent curse on this painful childbirth is not the be all an end all that God will make the way through now so all of that pretty well everything I've said could be contested and has been contested it seems to me that is as good a way of reading the passage as any I've come across and my question is why have some people taken those three verses and made an entire church policy out of it and been very fierce about it which has happened particularly again in America we thought we'd kind of got beyond that and it's now come back again what's going on in the culture to make people say this is the defining thing when they miss out so many other things in the New Testament you know that's one little passage how many times do we have teaching about riches and poverty in the New Testament how many times we have teaching about generosity to the poor and all of that and many people who fixate on that don't actually seem to bother about all those other things at all that's that's the real problem here well thank you very much I hope that's been helpful Lisa and where Tom goes on that particular passage first Timothy to 13 to 15 I mean it opens up the whole question of what's sometimes been called the egalitarian and complimentary in view of men and women in Scripture and this is Thomas's question in Seattle says what do you believe the Bible says about firstly women as pastors and elders well we've sort of covered that but he says I believe more in complementarianism in the roles in church and yet I struggle should I be updating my beliefs on this so what do you understand to be this kind of complementarian view right

is an egalitarian I think both of those words are misleading okay because it does seem to me that men and women are different and that psychologically biologically in all sorts of ways men and women are quite radically different which of course raises all sorts of other questions in our culture right now as well that's not to say that they're completely different it seems to me that certainly what little I I'm not a psychologist but what I've read and what I know as a pastor etc is that there is a considerable overlap so that men tend to be this way out and women tend to be that way out but there are many many overlaps and there's a sense in which they are complementary in that sense precisely and and you know we've got a difference and all that and if you do personality test like the Enneagram or the Myers Briggs there is a preponderance in some ways more men are in this category than that and more women but there is lots and lots of overlap so but that doesn't mean equality it doesn't mean identity and in a sense I saw this when we first ordained women I was dean of Litchfield in the 90s and the first ordination of women was I think 94 or 95 something like that and many of the older clergy who had argued for the ordination of women for years had done so on the grounds that many women were identical so it was unjust we got a preacher for that occasion who is a Catholic woman interestingly Mary Gray professor Mary Gray and she argued from the pulpit very strongly that we ought to ordain women because men and women are so different and God wants all these different gifts in the ministry and some of the older modernists who are horrified this is a post-modern affirmation of difference which seemed to challenge the identitarian solidarity and I want to say that's the rich mixture of cultures we live in right now as far as I can see both from scripture and from pastoral practice etc men and women are very significantly different and are not interchangeable in that sense and that God does want different giftedness right across the board in church leadership and ministry and just to drop in as a footnote first Corinthians 11 whatever it means about Adam and Eve and wearing of hats Paul envisages women leading in worship in that passage so you think it is time for Thomas to update his beliefs on this if he doesn't think that women can lead in worship then yes he needs to update okay what about in the family situation because that's the other area where we do get writings from Paul Ephesians and so on and what do you do with some of those sort of household rules and you know the famous one in Ephesians wives submit to your husbands and so on a lot of people read that and say oh there we go patriarchal Paul and product of his time and so on product of his time would never ever ever have written what he writes okay about slaves about children about about women because product of his time it would have been absolutely battering down the hatches you know the man rules the roost and slaves and children women watch out give us the context then I've obviously cherry picked a versa well well the passage about husbands and wives in Ephesians chapter five verse 21 begins submit to one another in the fear of the Messiah and then the women to their own husbands as to the Lord but then he talks about husbands love your wives as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself for her so that the role of the man there is incredibly demanding it's think about Jesus going to the cross think about all the self renunciation that went into that now that's how you

were to love your wives that doesn't look like patriarchy to me but what there is there in the context of a pagan city like Ephesus or Corinth or Rome or wherever it is what there is is a radically different way of life in which in this family there is mutual respect mutual enjoyment of different giftedness and a relishing of the other to be the other and to use our postmodern language in which the women are radically respected as fellow Christians not as subsidiary versions that we men are the real ones and you know there is in that context of the pagan world I think those household codes are really revolutionary and we have to remember that we are reading this after all the rhetoric about you know Victorian moories etc although actually a lot of it was Georgian as in 1920s and so on and so we react this way and that but if you just go back to the classical world and read a few books say Robert Harris's novels on Cicero or Tom Holland's brilliant books are on the Roman Empire imagine yourself living in that world and how women and slaves and so were treated then and then read the household codes I know which I'd rather than part of and in that sense if we are to draw anything from Ephesians it's that it's about mutual submission in that sense. Very specifically Ephesians 5:21 submit to one another and Paul is seeing their marriage very riskily as a reflection of something going on in Genesis 1 and 2 which fits with the whole of the rest of Ephesians which is about heaven and earth coming together about Jews and Gentiles coming together about men and women coming together that there's something cosmic going on here which is mutually affirmative no surprises in our platonic western world we have discounted earth and think we can get to heaven so we've discounted femininity and think that masculinity is worth it no actually they both matter.

Just to finish this off and I will you know plead my own biases here I'm married to a Church Minister Lucy and I once got into a conversation with a well-known evangelical Calvinist Mark Driscoll who was on my podcast many years ago at the height of his sort of fame and he was very much you know sort of sort of ministry church leadership was just male and he sort of challenged me in that podcast to say well how many men do you get along to your church you know his his view was if you don't have a man leading you won't attract men and and there's a sense in which I've heard that from other quarters that we were at risk of a too feminized version of the church and so on now as it happens I pushed back on that I felt we were very well represented in both genders and that wasn't an issue in our church but that's been the view even if it's whether or not it's kind of supported from Scripture I think a lot of people say we need men at the front because they're the leaders essentially. And it seems to me that was one of the possible takeaways from First Timothy 2 that if the women take over and say we're in charge now and you men get out of here then everything is going to go out of kilter in ways that it's perhaps hard to quantify. I know that argument I've run into it a few times I'd say that that's simply not in fact how it works and I don't know Mark Driscoll personally and I haven't debated with him or anything but within the church God moves in many mysterious ways and we mustn't be short term about this.

I mean there is there is some wisdom in seeing how the complement complementarity of men and women does work for instance the Coseo movement I'm not sure if you're familiar with it and the little courses which came out of Spanish Catholicism after the Civil War that they these were ways of bringing Christian spirituality back back to ordinary folk. When my wife and I went on Coseo in Montreal it was quite clearly organized that there were male Coseos and female Coseos and a woman could only go if a married woman could only go if her husband had already gone in order to prevent any sense that this was poets for the women you know etc and I think there was a bit of earthy wisdom about that but that was the same as that members of the congregation could only go if the rector of the parish had already been because the last thing they wanted was to have a little revolutionary group aware the real ones here and the rector not knowing what was going on so there was a kind of a wisdom about the stability there they didn't want to be seen to be subverting the institution but that can be something that's helpful in a particular situation or cultural instance. And Coseo here in the UK I think that they have mixed Coseos.

Well fascinating stuff thank you so much. Thank you. If people want to follow up as I said on any of these issues then do go and check out all of the other things you can read about from NT Wright on this front and do check out the resources available from our partners on the podcast SBCK and NT Wright online that podcast I mentioned with Mark Driscoll from The Unbelievable Show which is the other podcast I run available I think if memory serves back in early 2012 was when we put that out so if you search in the archives you'll find it there that conversation but it's been another fascinating addition of our program.

Thank you Tom. Good to be talking with you. And I look forward to seeing you again next time.

Yes indeed. Well I hope you enjoyed today's show thank you for being with us I do remember when this was first released a video of some of Tom's explanations on this got shared a great deal on social media if you find this show helpful do consider supporting us at premierunbelievable.com you can also register there for our regular newsletter and never miss a thing plus of course get the link to ask a question yourself for a future show. God bless you see you next time.