

# BRIEF THOUGHTS ON ANDREW HEARD'S CRITIQUE OF *HEARING HER VOICE*

John Dickson

Andrew Heard is an intelligent and accomplished pastor and church planter at *EV Church* on the New South Wales Central Coast, and he has been a friend for many years. His recently published critique of my *Hearing Her Voice* does not so much add to the current discussion as provide a counter-argument for the specific benefit of the folk at *EV Church* who will rightly look to him for guidance on this question. Lionel Windsor, one of the authors of Matthias Media's *Women, Sermons and the Bible*, felt Andrew's piece deserved a wider audience and so posted it on his blog. Since people have begun to ask me about it, and because I respect Andrew, it seems right not to ignore his paper but to provide a brief reply.

## 1. Tone

First, I want to say is that Andrew has done a good job of maintaining a measured tone throughout. For the most part, he has also avoided rhetorical flourishes and thinly veiled swipes. This is a good direction in the debate.

I naturally have several points of disagreement over Andrew's content, which at points provides an inaccurate account of my (and others') arguments and so lessens the usefulness of his criticisms.

## 2. Shifting definition

I can dispute upfront Andrew's cheeky complaint, made previously by Lionel Windsor, that my definition of teaching over the last year "keeps shifting as any critique is offered." My case is subtle and nuanced. Those who are not of a mind to be patient with any argument for women preaching seem to gravitate toward one-dimensional renditions of my views. When I point out their misunderstandings, they cry foul and suggest that I have moved the goal posts when, in fact, they have simply missed the target. My view of Paul's concept of teaching is unchanged (for ten years or more): "teaching" is *the authoritative task of transmitting intact the apostles' traditions of and about Jesus* or, to put it another way, teaching is *laying down the apostolic deposit*.

## 3. Explanation

Andrew suggests that I myself am confused about my own views of teaching, since, on the one hand, I insist that "teaching" does not refer to *expounding and explaining Bible texts* and yet, on the other, I freely say that "teaching" will involve some explanation and exposition. The confusion is all Andrew's. I have pointed out many times that I see an *overlap* between Paul's main speaking words—teach, prophesy, exhort, preach—but the overlap does not make these activities the same. It is Paul who goes out of his way to call them "different" (Rom 12:4-8).

The fact that “teaching” will involve *explanation* does not mean that teaching can be defined as explanation, anymore than “soccer” can be defined as *running* just because soccer involves running. To continue the analogy, the evangelical ban on women giving all sermons is as if Paul had forbidden women to play soccer and we have taken it to mean that women may not play any running sport! I have made this point many times, and a large part of Andrew’s critique becomes redundant once it is acknowledged.

#### **4. Education**

Andrew is mistaken when he states numerous times that my understanding of teaching “doesn’t include any sense of instruction or education.” Apparently, I am even “adamant that the word [teaching] can’t include explaining or educating.” Andrew is repeating a point made in *Women, Sermons and the Bible*. It does make my view sound a little weird: how on earth could a word like “teaching” *not* be educative? Well, indeed! And in my reply to *WSB*, which Andrew has read, I repeatedly describe Paul’s concept of teaching as “educational” (12 times by my count). How could I be clearer than in my statement, “Teaching is, of course, fundamentally an educational activity: it is the process by which the learned (i.e., the “teacher”) transmits the apostolic deposit to the learner”? Andrew is wide of the mark.

#### **5. Verbatim**

Andrew (like *WSB* before him) thinks that by *transmitting the apostolic deposit intact* I mean a simple *verbatim* repetition of words. He does note that in my reply to *WSB* I reject this caricature by pointing out that a body of traditions can be *stable* without being *verbatim* (we only have to look at the differences between the Gospels to see that a stable retelling of traditions doesn’t mean a verbatim retelling).

Andrew rejects my explanation as “a distinction without a difference.” But an enormous amount of scholarly output is devoted precisely to this distinction. There is a longstanding debate on the point between Birger Gerhardsson and James Dunn. Gerhardsson reckons the early Christian oral traditions were strictly and formally controlled (i.e., almost verbatim), whereas Dunn insists there was “fixity and flexibility” in the transmission of the traditions. Those who have followed my work over the years will know that I generally agree with Dunn. Not recognizing these distinctions leads Andrew to some caricatures and non sequiturs (see #8 below).

#### **6. Doctrine Commission**

Another example of the lack of nuance in Andrew’s piece is his discussion of the 1984 Sydney Anglican Doctrine Commission report on women’s ministry—which I frequently quote in my reply to Matthias Media. Andrew notes that my account of teaching “isn’t the first time a definition with similar wording to this has been offered,” and he acknowledges the work of German

scholar Klaus Wegenast and the Doctrine Commission report. He then tries to distance the findings of the Commission (and Wegenast) from my views. But in so doing he fails to make his readers aware of the most relevant part of the Commission's findings.

Andrew tells us that the Anglican Doctrine Commission found that "teaching" in the New Testament can refer to "exposition and application of Scripture" and that this is "contrary to John". That much is true. *But it is surely beside the point.* What Andrew does not mention is that the report—in the next sentence—says that Paul's use of "teaching" *changes* in the Pastoral Epistles, where the word takes on a more narrow reference. To quote the report (again):

In the Pastoral Epistles teaching appears to be an authoritative function concerned with the faithful transmission of apostolic doctrine or tradition and committed to men specially chosen (e.g. 2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). It is within this context that the specific prohibition of 1 Timothy 2:12 must be understood.

In other words, it is irrelevant that the Doctrine Commission says "teaching" can have a broad meaning elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul's prohibition on women "teaching" is found in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 2:12), and in those epistles "teaching" is used with the more specialized sense of *authoritatively transmitting the apostolic traditions*. It is precisely on these grounds that the Doctrine Commission concludes (as I do) that, while Paul's injunction in 1 Tim 2:12 prevents women from assuming "the authoritative teaching office", it "would not appear to exclude absolutely the possibility of women preaching or teaching in church." Readers of Andrew's piece are not given an accurate picture of the Commission's most relevant findings.

## **7. Exegetical points**

Andrew follows the mistake of *WSB* when he dismisses certain exegetical possibilities (mine) without acknowledging that the same interpretations are offered by key commentators. For example, Andrew is uncompromising (just like *WSB*) in saying that "receive" and "taught" in Gal 1:12 are quite separate activities. Thus, there is no near-synonymous relationship between *passing on tradition* (which is what "receiving" means) and "teaching". But Andrew must know (because I have pointed it out before) that scholars like F.F. Bruce, L. J. Martyn, R. Funk, and others, all agree with me on this point: "teaching" in Gal 1:12 lies in parallel with Paul's key vocabulary for passing on the apostolic traditions ("hand over" / "receive"). I don't mind if Andrew and *WSB* disagree with me on certain exegetical judgments. I am, however, concerned that one side of the debate rushes to dismiss judgments as without merit, knowing full well (yet never acknowledging) that these very opinions are standard in New Testament scholarship.

I am similarly perplexed by Andrew's overconfident reading of 2 Tim 3:16, where Paul says to Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Andrew assures us that "a plain reading of this text will naturally lead someone to imagine that the object of 'teaching' is a written text." He is sure that "profitable" means "used for" (his words). On the other hand, Andrew describes as "strained" my claim that Paul is simply telling Timothy to keep studying his Old Testament because doing so will prepare him for his public ministry: it will help him teach the apostolic traditions (which are full of Old Testament references); it will help him to rebuke and correct people; and it will help him be a more godly minister of the gospel. This seems natural to me, especially since the word *ōphelimos* means "profitable, useful, beneficial"; it does not mean "used for". Other examples could be offered.

## 8. Written teaching

Andrew makes a big deal of the fact that much of my argument refers to "teaching" as passing on the *oral* traditions of the apostles. He takes this to imply that if "teaching" in the New Testament ever refers to passing on a *written* apostolic tradition, this would undermine my account of "teaching". And to the degree that I would admit that the apostolic teaching can be written—which I do indeed admit—my view must be confused. Indeed, in a comical moment, Andrew suggests that there are really *three* definitions of "teaching" in this debate: one offered by Matthias Media and *two* offered by me!

Again, the confusion is Andrew's. I explain in *Hearing Her Voice* that the apostolic traditions (i.e., the content of the teaching) may be either *written* or *oral*. It makes no difference. It's just that hardly any of the traditions *were* written when Paul wrote to Timothy. The role of the "teacher" in Paul's day was to be the authoritative custodian of this apostolic deposit, whether oral or written, charged with the responsibility to transmit this material to the congregation so that believers learn it. Because Andrew gets stuck thinking that my view of teaching involves mere "repetition" of words "verbatim", he comes up with the bizarre critique that my account of teaching amounts to mere "reading": he insists, "John in fact ends up saying that our contemporary 'teacher' is teaching when 'the NT is read or quoted'," and, further, that this is "a necessary conclusion given his definitions." This is a caricature by non sequitur.

While I do say that *transmission* of the apostolic deposit takes place when the New Testament is read out in church (of course it does!), I have explicitly rejected the suggestion that "teaching" today can be equated with "reading". Moreover, Andrew must know that I offer an explicit account of how "teaching" does continue today *in the contemporary sermon*. I say repeatedly that sermons are on a spectrum. Some function as focused acts of transmitting the apostolic deposit (i.e., "teaching") and are the domain of the

congregational teacher. Others function more as *exhortations* to trust and obey this apostolic deposit (and other parts of Scripture). They contain an element of “teaching” but they are not the formal “teaching” Paul forbids to women in 1 Tim 2:12—just as teaching-sermons with an element of exhortation don’t suddenly become what Paul called “the exhortation”. Despite the overlap, the apostle insists that “teaching” and “exhortation” are “different” functions in the church (Rom 12:4-8). To recall the sporting analogy, soccer is not rugby just because both involve similar activities (running, tackling, balls, kicking, goals, etc).

I am not arguing for *less* teaching (another non sequitur offered by Andrew). I am just observing that the sermons we currently offer in reformed evangelical circles are already on this spectrum. We don’t need less or more “teaching”, less or more “exhortation”. We just need to recognise that not all sermons function as a “transmission of apostolic doctrine or tradition” (to use the words of the 1984 Doctrine Commission). And so not all sermons are forbidden to women. Andrew fails to grapple with this subtlety.

## **Conclusion**

The efforts of Matthias Media’s *Woman, Sermons and the Bible*, along with this more measured critique from Andrew Heard, have convinced me of two things. First, those who oppose women preaching in church are not as open as they should be to careful, nuanced engagement with the contrary viewpoint. There is a rush to misunderstanding and a tendency toward caricature. I can believe it is accidental, but it is also unmistakable.

Secondly, I continue to feel that the only way to redress the problem of these wooden, one-dimensional presentations and rebuttals of my arguments is for these Christian leaders to agree to a public discussion. I am not looking for a combative ‘debate’, with winners and losers. I am talking about a moderated conversation that, by its very nature, discourages *mediated* versions of each other’s positions and, just as importantly, allows the audience to ask questions and so make up their own minds about this important issue.

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