

Women in the Pulpit?

Craig L. Blomberg

Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary, Littleton, CO, June
2014

John Dickson is a good friend and scholar who has articulated a creative and suggestive argument for women delivering sermons within the almost uniformly and strongly complementarian context of the Sydney diocese of the Anglican Church in Australia. It is called *Hearing Her Voice*. Peter Bolt is a good friend and scholar who with Tony Payne has edited a collection of essays in response. It is called *Women, Sermons and the Bible*. I am a mild complementarian who has written repeatedly, most recently in the revised edition of *Two Views of Women in Ministry*, edited by my now retired colleague Jim Beck, defending that the Bible from cover to cover holds a consistent position in which the one “highest” position of leadership among God’s people in a congregation combining teaching with the exercise of authority is reserved for men. In the Old Testament, this was the priesthood. During Jesus’ ministry, it was the apostles. During the rest of the New Testament period it was the office of elder or overseer. In the U.S., with some notable exceptions, this last view seems to be gaining in acceptance in many evangelical contexts.

Dickson’s book and the Bolt/Payne volume both appear to operate from the assumption that 1 Timothy 2:12 is describing functions, not offices. Dickson focuses particularly on the meaning of the verb for “teach,” arguing that it refers to the comparatively narrow function of passing on authoritative and apostolic tradition. J. I. H. McDonald’s classic *Kerygma and Didache* demonstrated already in 1980 that in broad strokes there was a distinction between preaching and teaching in the ancient Mediterranean world and that the role of a religious “teacher” was often narrower than what we would today think of as what a preacher does. The teacher’s responsibility was to help catechumens learn and pass on a fixed body of doctrine central to a given religious or philosophical movement. Based on this distinction, Dickson does not see anything in 1 Timothy 2:12 that would prevent women from preaching as it is typically construed today.

The Bolt and Payne volume also begins with the assumption that this passage is prohibiting women from exercising certain functions or carrying out certain activities in the church with men present. Their contributors dispute that “teach” can be limited to as narrow a definition as Dickson wants and that contextually there is no reason for making this limitation. It is likely that Dickson has tried so hard to make “teach” a precise, technical term that he has defined it slightly too narrowly, but the Bolt-Payne volume does not interact with the wealth of detail found in McDonald and elsewhere

that does suggest a basic distinction between “preach” and “teach,” even if in some contexts there can be a little overlap.

Claire Smith offers a trio of carefully researched articles in the attempted rebuttal of Dickson which, ironically, would be hard to defend as a legitimate activity for a woman, as long as one sees the 1 Timothy passage as describing functions. It is true that she, like Bolt in a later chapter, limits the role of teaching forbidden to women over men to the regular, authoritative exposition of Scripture in church, so that from their perspective her contributions are entirely appropriate. But the very complaints they offer against Dickson—that he presupposes a very specific historical reconstruction of the events at Ephesus always subject to the vagaries of scholarship and not clearly articulated in the text apply to their assumptions as well. Nothing in 1 Timothy would suggest that Paul is speaking only of sermons or only of oral teaching about the meaning and significance of Scripture (as opposed to the written counterpart that Smith offers). John Piper has recently recognized this and tried to argue that something unique happens when women appear in church “embodied” to deliver sermons but stumbles all over himself in the attempt. When I know an author, male or female, I regularly picture them mentally in my mind whether I am reading their work, listening to their voice on tape or live, or actually looking at them or a video of them in the flesh. Their impact in my life is virtually identical irrespective of the context.

In short, if Smith’s arguments are correct and she does not have the right to stand in front of a congregation and expound 1 Timothy 2:12, neither does she have the right to do so in written form. And while her articles do not comprise a full-orbed exposition and application of everything there is to say about this passage, neither do most sermons, and what she does write comprises a good chunk of what a preacher agreeing with her position would presumably want to say in a sermon. If her viewpoints are true and the correct understanding of the Bible, then they are authoritative for God’s people whether or not she is standing behind a pulpit at the front a church.

Payne argues that Dickson inappropriately complicates matters by presupposing a certain historical background to overly narrow the contemporary application of the passage and blames this on the popular evangelical approach, articulated clearly in Fee and Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, that we can transfer New Testament commands to the present world only when contexts are sufficiently similar. Payne rightly highlights the subjectivity involved in determining how similar things have to be before something applies. He also recognizes that virtually all Christians, however conservative, do this sooner or later, at least with respect to greeting one another with a holy kiss. But he then correctly observes that there is a readily discernible cross-cultural principle that animated Paul’s specific command, namely that Christians greet one another warmly with whatever form of affection is

appropriate in a given culture. Because he cannot find such a cross-cultural principle behind the command to women not to preach or exercise authority over men, he takes that restriction itself to be the cross-cultural prohibition. But he does not consider suggestions that have been commonly made for precisely such a principle such as decorum in the church in a very hierarchical society, avoidance of false teaching (which we know from chapter one existed in Ephesus, even if debates continue over its nature), or concern for evangelism (as is made clear in Paul's "twin" letter on this theme to Titus).

If Paul's prohibition is therefore about functions or activities, I deem that Dickson has substantially got the better of the argument. But I suspect that neither side will convince the other as long as this first-order presupposition remains unchallenged. The point I have tried to argue on more than one occasion that none of our authors interacts with is that we must ask *why* Paul chose the twin prohibitions of "teach" and "exercise authority." Putting the question only slightly differently, does 1 Timothy itself contain any clues to what Paul is envisioning in this restriction? Chapter 3 immediately follows on from this discussion by giving criteria for the selection of overseers and deacons. While the criteria for the two groups are extremely similar, one notable distinctive of elders is that they must be "able to teach" (v. 2). Acts 20:17 and 28 find Luke and Paul using the labels "elders" and "overseers" interchangeably with the leaders of this very Ephesian church. And in 1 Timothy 5:17, the elders are further described as those who exercise authority. So without engaging in any speculative historical background but limiting ourselves strictly to the inspired, inerrant biblical word, we find that elders/overseers are distinguished from others in the church by the twin roles of teaching and exercising authority *together*.

It would seem much more probable, therefore, that 1 Timothy 2:12 is not referring to all women being disallowed from all teaching over men or from all exercising of authority over men in the church (notice there are no further contextual limitations as long as we take these as mere activities or functions) but rather from being elders. Presumably if Payne were to grant this much, even he would also acknowledge, given the diversity of ways the term "elder" is used throughout the church worldwide, along with the number of other labels for a similar or even identical office (especially created over the centuries by Anglicans!), that the application today would be to restrict women from the *office* that combines the ultimate authority for a given congregation with a regular teaching responsibility.

At this point the discussion shifts dramatically. Gone are all the complex, casuistic discussion of whether a given person is "teaching the word," "expounding Scripture," merely "sharing devotionally," singing rather than merely speaking outstanding theology (which seems universally acceptable for women), and so on. Rather the person or persons in a given congregation with whom "the buck stops" for the ultimate authoritative teaching role should be men. Can a woman preach a passage of

Scripture if she does not hold such an office, under the delegated authority of the elders? Of course. Can she teach men in some other context, inside or outside of the church building, the sanctuary, the center of the church, behind the pulpit, and so on? Naturally. The point is not the location or nature of her teaching but whether or not she holds the office of elder or its functional equivalent in a given setting.

Incidentally, such a perspective could accommodate Dickson's broader insight that "teaching" in the Pastoral Epistles focuses on transmitting the apostolic traditions—and I'd like to think he might reconsider his conclusions in light of this framework.

I attend precisely such a church. It is a small congregation, with a pastoral staff of full- and part-time men and women, all of whom raise their own support because the demographic to whom we minister donates about \$5000-\$7000 a month to the church offering, and much of this goes to benevolence for the very needy city people that form a significant part of our congregation and neighborhood. This enables us to have a much larger pastoral staff that any other church our size could probably ever afford and accomplish much more ministry through them, as well as through the laity they empower. We have a church council of men and women that form the one advisory body to the pastoral staff, with duties that overlap with deacons in traditional Baptist churches or with ruling elders in traditional Presbyterian churches. But there is only one individual, our senior pastor, who is considered an elder, and his age (old enough to be the father of most of the rest of the staff), experience as founder of the now fourteen-year-old mission to mostly countercultural young adults, and his responsibilities according to his job description justify him alone holding that office.

Meanwhile we have several gifted women staff who serve under him and bless our congregation regularly with solid, evangelical, expository preaching, which is as accurate and as relevant as any of the men on our staff. Our senior pastor, especially as he draws ever nearer to an age in which he will partially step back from his duties, is training a possible successor (a younger *man*), while he forms part of and meets with our preaching team weekly to debrief the previous week's message and prepare for the coming week's one. He is very generous in allowing them to preach, sometimes almost as regularly as he does, even if he does still speak on a plurality of the Sundays in a year. And we lose nothing in the process but are consistently blessed and challenged when our other staff preaches.

Nothing in the Payne and Bolt volume comes close to convincing me that any of this is contrary to God's will. If it turns out to be, I suspect he will forgive us for trying to involve more rather than fewer individuals in kingdom ministry of almost all kinds, with the fruit that it has borne as a result. But if we never allowed women to preach sermons, and then turned out to be wrong, how much good in the world might have been left undone, how many people left untouched by the encouragement and conviction that their messages have brought about? Every one of us could well be wrong in the conclusions we hold on this vexed question and we would do well to

admit that on a regular basis. I suspect Dickson would admit it. I'm not sure if the authors in the Bolt and Payne volume would, or would do so as readily, but I hope they would. At any rate, we should all ask the question, if we are wrong in what we hold, who will have done the greater damage?