

Women, Gifts and the Body of Christ

Mike Cope At Highland Church of Christ -- January 16, 2005

PRAYER *Let's pray together.*

Lord today I'm so keenly aware of how indebted I am to godly women and men who have helped form me in the way of Jesus Christ, my Lord, yet I'm aware that I've been blinded by my upbringing blinded by my lack of wisdom blinded by my sin.

So, I pray as always that you will pour through me the gift of preaching, Grant us searching minds and open hearts, grant us wisdom. For you alone are full of wisdom. And grant us unity, for we are one in Christ. We thank you that our salvation doesn't depend on getting issues like this right. For our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness. And, it's through him that we pray, and we all say....

FACES - Different Ways People Have Responded

People Left Because of the Changes

This morning, my mind is full of pictures, pictures of faces. Some are faces of those who've left Highland recently because of the changes we've announced and started making, that invites women to participate more visibly in our worship assemblies. These are beloved people whose absence stings.

People Left Because So Slow in Making Changes

And I see faces of those who've left through the years because we hadn't yet made these changes. Most of them went on, into other religious groups. They were and are beloved members whose absence also stings.

People Left Because Changes Were Not Bold Enough

And then I see faces of those who've left recently because they thought our conclusions and changes were not bold enough or didn't go far enough. These too are deeply loved people.

People Stayed but Are Uneasy

I see the faces of those who are still here but are uneasy at best, and maybe even disturbed, wondering why we had to make the changes when some didn't agree.

Women Who Might Hear That Their Past Service Wasn't Important

And I see the faces of women who felt like they've heard a message, a subtle message that said, "what you've done through the years, wasn't really important." Teaching children's classes, showing hospitality, cooking meals that didn't really matter. We never meant to say that. I certainly never meant to say that, and it's not true. But I and others have to take responsibility for not being clear about this; that those gifts are deeply cherished by God.

Women Who Have Given Up On Using Their Gifts in the Body

And I see the faces of women who've almost given up on using their gifts with the body of Christ, like a woman from another congregation who shared this letter with me a letter to her elders:

LETTER TO THE ELDERS

Dear fellow followers of the way.

I was incredibly saddened tonight when we gathered to offer supplications and praise to our Heavenly Father, as we begin to do his work in new ways. As usual only half of the Christians in our midst were invited or allowed to offer up prayer to him.

I've come to terms with the fact that my god given gifts will go to the grave mostly unused. Contrary to popular belief, my gifts are not cooking for large crowds, doing clerical work, or teaching small children as wonderful as those gifts truly are.

Fifty years ago, I attended three different Churches of Christ where African Americans were not allowed or were not welcome. Today we'd like to think that wasn't true but indeed it was. Fifty years from now our fellowship will look back with shock and shame of the way women were kept in subservient positions in the service of the Lord.

Women my age are resigned, although I cannot promise I will always be. But I can assure you that many of today's young women will not be. Sadly, three of my own granddaughters are already gone.

Young Women In A Bible Class at ACU

And I see the faces of those young women in the Bible class that I started teaching this week, Bible and ministry majors at ACU. Now if I was talking about a Bible class that I was in when I was going through my theological training and was telling you that there were at - in that class, you would probably correctly presume that we're talking about young men. But as I look up at my class it's about half and half. It's probably about 40 guys and 40 girls. And I see the faces of these young women whom we are training for ministry.

Mike's Story - Influenced Under The Authority of Scripture

We fairly recently began including women more visibly in our weekly assemblies. It is not a position I came to easily or gladly. I was fully trained in the traditional restricted belief. And when I came to believe that that was an improper reading of Scripture, I fought it, because for me scripture and tradition came into conflict. This happened not because I came under the cultural influence of feminism. Trust me there was very little of that influence in the studies I received, but because I had better tools to read Scripture. And I'll come back to that word better in just a moment.

A lot of my friends and I got into conversations - actually it was students and professors, we realized that with this different way of reading the Bible it was leading us to a different place on this. Many of us came to believe that tradition was wrong. So now we've stated, the leaders of this church have stated, that we believe scripture allows and encourages the use of gifts and talents of all members of the community of faith, for the sake of the gospel.

And because of some specific local problems, there are two passages in the New Testament that lay down limitations. But to hold to those limitations today is to do just the opposite of what was intended. You wind up asking people to jump over a hurdle that is unnecessary on their journey of faith.

But I want you to be assured of this that the leadership of this church has not set aside its commitment to Scripture. In fact, it's a fresh reading of Scripture, a new eagerness to be under the authority of Scripture that has led us here.

We still believe this part of the foundations of faith that speaks of Scripture, it says, "The Spirit inspired the prophets and apostles to speak God's word, guiding the preservation steady and proclamation of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments the unique revelation of God under which we stand. Our authoritative guide for faith and life." It's written right into Highlands foundations of faith statement. And so this comes not from a disregard of Scripture, but from an even greater regard for its authority. It's, I think, a "better reading" of the text.

"Better Reading" of Scriptures Explained

Now let me explain that because I don't mean better in a haughty sense, but better in the sense that you would use on a journey. When you're on a journey, better has a little different connotation. I'm on this journey and I hand the baton off to you. Hopefully I've learned some things on my leg of the journey that people before me had not yet discovered, and I'm trusting as I hand it to you that you're going to learn some things I don't know. Those of you who are a lot younger than me I'm trusting you.

That you're going to take the things you hear me say over these years, and you're going to receive them and test them biblically. But you'll go beyond and you'll learn things I never knew. It's in that sense that I mean better.

Church of Christ Heritage - Our Shift Because of A BETTER READING

Until the 1890s, many churches didn't allow women to sing because they said the Bible says women should be silent in the churches. Right. First Corinthians 14. Now I'm having people today say to me, women must be

silent in the church and no matter what you say to explain that, it says in black and white women must be silent. But they allow women to sing.

And if it says it means absolutely women are to be silent, that women should not be joining in the Lord's Prayer, women should not be saying "amen," and women should not be singing. Earlier generations knew that if you take that consistently, you ought to ask only men to sing. **BUT THAT CHANGED BECAUSE OF A BETTER READING OF SCRIPTURE.** Eventually, people realized that could not be what Paul meant and read it contextually. They realized that's not what he meant.

Church of Christ Used Their Reading of Scripture to Support Slavery

Many Christians in the 19th century defended slavery and many of the 20th century defended segregation, quoting Bible texts. At the Christian University where I attended, six years before I got there, the president of the university got up in Chapel, and made an explicit call for segregation, based on the Bible.

Today we have a better reading of those texts. Unfortunately, we were drug along by culture. That happens sometimes, you know. Sometimes we say you have to be careful of culture and that's true, but in other times in the history of the church it's been the culture, dragging the church to a more appropriate place.

Evaluate How You Read The Bible

We've come to realize that scripture didn't drop down like a constitution. Scripture is a collection of stories and letters and poems and parables and Gospels and Proverbs, and everyone has to face the challenge of interpreting it. You can't just say, in other words, well **we just read the Bible where we go.** Nobody just reads the Bible, even in doing that you're interpreting it. **You have to ask what's cultural, and what's eternal, and that's not an easy thing to do.**

For example, look at some things that are said in Leviticus 19. Now if I were to ask you which of these do you think is an ongoing command of God and which is not, I think you would have kind of a sense, for example, **don't steal.** I think we would probably all agree that that's a word of God forever that we should not steal. But what about this one – **“don't plant your field with two kinds of seed”.** Anybody ever planted tomatoes and squash in the same field? Love your neighbor as yourself is there in Leviticus 19, but so is **“don't wear clothing woven of two kinds of material”.** Anybody here with any cotton wool blends this morning? Leviticus 19 says **don't lie.** Do you think that's temporary or eternal? I think we'd say eternal.

How about this one - **don't put tattoo marks on yourselves?** All the parents say eternal. Right, yeah. Don't curse the death. And **don't cut the hair at the sides of your head.** **You see, that's a bit of a challenge to go there and ask for these prolonged principles of what was just fitting that culture.** What was for that moment, for that specific location, and which ones are tied into the nature of God which ones, tie into big themes like community and cross and resurrection, and new creation.

How To Read Scripture -- Do We Really Do What Scriptures Say?

Jesus said, **sell all you have and give to the poor.** Some people have taken that to be for all people for all time because it says it, “Sell all you have and give to the poor”. But most, I think, have said there are principles embedded in that; that he's not asked all of us to sell all we have.

Jesus couldn't have been any clearer than when he said, **“I want you to wash one another's feet”.** As I've done to us so you should do to one another, wash one another's feet. When was the last time you gave a good foot washing, in the name of Jesus? Most of us I think would say, "Well, that was their culture." And there's a principle embedded in that that's still valid, that we ought to serve one another, but in more culturally appropriate ways. I agree with that but it's still true that it says, wash one another's feet.

Or how about this - one five times the New Testament says **“greet one another with a holy kiss”.** Has everybody obeyed that yet today? Some are probably for bringing that one back. But I would guess most of us don't literally practice that. We would say, well, we do greet one another and there is holiness in our greeting but it's a different cultural expression. It's true. **But that means you've been interpreting scripture and you realize that when it says it those five times, it doesn't mean you have to do it exactly that way in all times in all cultures.** Or what about First Corinthians 11 that says **women must wear head coverings in the assembly?**

And so, I look around, it looks like most of us have decided that we don't all have to do that today, even though it's very clear that women are to wear a head covering. But we would probably say **well there's something about that culture that we don't even fully understand that required that. (head covering)**

Or here's another one - **1st Timothy 5:9**, Paul says clearly openly, that they are **not to help a widow who is not yet 60 years old**. Now, what would you think if the elders of the church got up and announced one Sunday morning. We've been reading First Timothy again and we decided it's the policy of this church that we will not be of assistance to any widow who is not yet 60. I think we would all be offended by that. But there's a verse there and it's clear no widow may be put on the list of widows, unless she is over 40 so then we could argue about whether 60 is okay. It's over 60.

Well I think what we would say is but when you read the larger context of Scripture, when you come to know that God has great concern for the fatherless and the widows and God's love is for all of those all who are poor, that there must have been about some specific issues, some problem that Paul was having to face there, and that he would not be opposed to us today helping a woman who is 59 years old, and in need.

Well this is the challenge we always face - the challenge of reading scripture appropriately.

Has the Contemporary Church Settled for the Status Quo?

And here's an illustration. Tomorrow is Martin Luther King holiday, and in a letter he wrote from jail in Birmingham, Alabama, he said, **the contemporary church is often a weak and ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo.**

Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of the things as they are. Well he's right, isn't he? What a prophetic word.

Many Southern Christians and prominent leaders of the restoration movement, preached sermons in the 19th century defending slavery. And they had texts, texts like Ephesians 6, Colossians 3, 1 Peter 2. Explicit texts that say, this is the way the masters are to treat the slaves, and this is the way the slaves are to respond to the masters. He doesn't say stop slavery. He just regulates it and they preached those sermons, with their texts in hand endorsing the ways of American slavery.

They argued that it's clear that God intends for **slaves to be submissive to their leaders**. Now we're scandalized by that. We can hardly imagine that anyone thought that. We'd never allow somebody at Highland to get up and preach that message. They didn't understand the difference between a concession and eternal command.

Yeah, I guess if you started with those scriptures right there and ran everything else through them all, the rest of Scripture through those three, you might wind up there **saying God is pro slavery**.

But what if you began with the larger picture. **What if you started with God's mercy and His compassion?** What if you began with Luke chapter four of Jesus announcing the embracing of his work by saying **I'm setting the prisoners free. What about understanding that God is no respecter of persons.**

Paul's Perspective of Culture

Paul's a realist. Paul knew that these little outposts of the kingdom, were tiny persecuted minorities who have little chance of changing things in that large Greco Roman world. And so, Paul operated with what people have called a conservative social ethic. In other words he would write to them and tell them how to live in that culture. But it's not that he was endorsing it. In First Corinthians chapter 9, he explains his principle at work. He says, "I become all things to all people so that I might win all."

In other words, he doesn't want to throw up a hurdle that would keep somebody from hearing the gospel, and in a culture where slavery was just the norm. Paul is going to tell the church how to live in that. But he knows that little persecuted minority came up in that.

And yet here's the ironic thing, even in doing that, Paul was undermining those cultural beliefs wasn't he? Because even in those passages he would talk about mutual submission.

And then he wrote that little book Philemon. Now in Philemon, he's not talking about the big structures of the Greco Roman world, he's talking about the church, the little house church that meets in Philemon's house and

he says, and here we get a picture of how he thinks this is going to play out. Philemon, I'm sending Onesimus back, and I want you to receive him now, not as a slave, but as a brother.

So you can see what's happening as Paul undermines these cultural beliefs. There's a distinction between new life in Christ, and the degree of implementation possible in the first century, with that small powerless minority. But Paul I think believed that eventually Galatians 3 would win out. Galatians 3, where he says that you own up to your baptismal vows that in Christ, there is no slave nor free. No Jew nor Greek. No male nor female.

White slave owners began with restrictive texts. Abolitionists began with the big biblical picture of justice and mercy. The slave owners armed with the biblical proof texts were unbiblical. They didn't know the heart of God; they weren't honoring Jesus. They were influenced by their culture, and in that sense, they were the cultural church. And it's my belief that the same thing has happened on this issue. That Churches of Christ have conformed their beliefs to culture. We are in this sense, the cultural church. But it's not the culture of 2005 that we've conformed to. We've been molded by a culture that doesn't even exist here anymore.

A Woman's Place -- How Our Churches Became More Restrictive

It's the culture of true womanhood. Which is very different than what was before and very different from what came afterwards. But that period of time of viewing women only in one little context. A woman's place was in the home, women couldn't vote until 1920, they couldn't own property in many states until 1950. And in response then to the women's movement, we became even more restrictive.

So, our churches that formerly had women praying in them, no longer let women pray; our churches that had women leading singing, no longer lead singing, our churches that had deaconesses, no longer had deaconesses. Paul did whatever he could to make the gospel hearable.

We have done just the opposite when it comes to the ministry gifts of women. We've taken Paul's two restrictions in specific settings and made them the norm and armed with our biblical texts, we became unbiblical.

OUR CONCLUSION

The conclusions we come to are these: first of all that, scripture is calling on the inclusion of all in the sharing of talents and gifts, breaking down barriers of Jew/Gentile, slave/free, and male/ female. And even though it was radical in that culture, women were seen as fully gifted by God and full participants in the community of faith for the building up of the church, not just for individual exercising and gifts but using them for the building up of the church.

And we've concluded that 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, which we'll get back to in a moment, were restrictions Paul gave because of the culture and because of specific situations. Namely, complete chaos in Corinth, so that he had to quiet tongue speakers, prophets and wives who kept asking questions, and in Ephesus because false teachers have gotten a foothold through some of the women who had become domineering, an attitude that doesn't fit women or men in the kingdom.

We've come to these conclusions not because we're caving into culture but because we want to be faithful to Scripture.

Jesus Came To Break Women Free From the Curse of the Fall

Alright let's grab our Bibles, please. Turn back to Genesis chapter one and two, the story of Eve, Adam and Eve. We know in that story that Eve is made in the image of God. She is created as a companion.

The Hebrew word is *ezer*, which means *a helper, a companion*. It doesn't mean she's a caddy while he goes around subduing the earth. It means she's right there by him. Usually that word is used the Old Testament to refer to God, God is our companion, or helper. But here at first, Eve, it implies reciprocity community and companionship.

From a triune God, a unity and diversity of humankind emerges. But in Genesis 3, the story goes sour. Something happens, bad choices are made by Adam and Eve. They sin, and the world forever changes. There are consequences.

And in **Genesis 3:16** God says to the woman, **"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing. With pain you will give birth to children; your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you."**

I've heard that quoted in weddings. Like it's some kind of gift. The gift of childbearing and pain and because people have thought that that's a sweet thing, desiring your husband but this is not in a sweet context. **This is the fall.**

Now there is an appropriate kind of desire of husband for wife and wife for husband, but we're not talking about that we're talking about looking to God now. And then looking instead to your husband, so that your own sense of yourself comes from him. Now you're turning to him for your identity. You depend on somebody else to let you know who you are in your significance. And that's the fall. That's not good.

He created Adam and Eve in his image looking to him for who they are. But now he says in this fallen world, you're going to look to your husband for that, and the reciprocal thing will be he's going to try to rule over you.

And that's happened again and again in abusive and semi-abusive situations. Sometimes with men referring back to this to say that's the way God wanted. It's not the way God wanted, that's the fallen world, the world in which **Jesus broke into, to try to break us free from the curse.**

Male Hierarchy System Was A Result of the Fall

And the reign of God would bring a new way of submission and service and love, forgiveness to one another. A whole new way, trying to unlearn the ways of this world. It's why it's new creation. **Originally, men and women shared equally, and the fall shattered this.**

Deborah & Jael

There's a long history of gender conflict, based on male hierarchy that comes then from this fall. Turn next to the book of Judges.

Judges chapter 4, and there we read about Deborah who was one of the judges of Israel. Now the word judge just means the leader. She was the leader of the people of God during this time.

Now, someone might want to point out to me she's the only woman we read about who was one. My response would be the fact that there is one in that culture is remarkable. So, if you try to say to me God doesn't want a woman in that kind of role, I would say God put a woman in that kind of role. It doesn't break his heart, he put her there. It says in Judges that she was a prophetess, and He (God) placed her as the leader of the people of Israel. Barack refused to lead his army in the battle unless she went and she replies in verse 9, because of the way you're going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.

Sisera ran to the tent of **a woman, named Jael**. He asked her for water, and she did one better getting him some milk. Up until then, she had been so kind to him. She was the perfect hostess. Up until that point when she got a tent peg and drove it through his head, but up till then she'd been so kind to him. And then in Judges 5, you get the song of Deborah which is really just a little trash talking. Deborah is announcing what God has done.

Look at Judges 5:24, here's her song, **"Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber, the Kenite, most blessed of tent dwelling women. He asked for water she gave him milk in a bowl fit for noble, she brought in curdled milk. Her hand reached for the tent peg her right hand for the workman's hammer, she struck Sisera, she crushed his head shattered and pierced his temple. At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay. At her feet, he sank, he fell where he sank, there he fell dead."**

Just a little lullaby from Deborah to sing to your children at night. It's just remarkable that in that patriarchal culture, God raised up Deborah to be the leader.

Huldah - Spoke The Word of the Lord to King Josiah

Please turn now to Second Kings 22. You've heard of course about the reform of **King Josiah**. But do you remember that place of Huldah in that story? It's a critical place.

Who knows what the whole restoration would have been had it not been for this prophet, who spoke the word of God to the people name Huldah. There in the temple they find out that there is this book, the Torah, the law. They bring it. They need an interpreter, so they send them eventually to Huldah. And Huldah, it says in 2 Kings 22:15,

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says tell the man who sent you to me. This is what the Lord says,..." And then she speaks this prophetic word on God's behalf. She's a prophet like **Miriam** like

Deborah, like **Anna**, and other women in Scripture, she speaks forth the word of the Lord to them at a critical time in Israel's history.

JESUS: A Revolutionary Advocate To Bring Restoration To Women

When you get into the story of Jesus, of course, it's even more amazing.

During the time of Jesus women were secondary citizens in the world. Not many women held offices. Women couldn't vote. They couldn't form contractual relationships without men. Rabbis often regarded women as inferior to men. Women couldn't appear in public as witnesses before a court in that world, in that culture.

Jesus came as a revolutionary, valuing all women and men that he met. In John 4:27, the onlookers were amazed that this Rabbi was seen in public in a theological discussion with the woman at the well. But to him it wasn't a scandal. It was the way of God; she was loved by God and called to be a witness by God.

Luke 8:1-3.

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Can you imagine how unusual it was that there were women bankrolling a traveling rabbi.

Jesus Acknowledges Mary Right To Be A Disciple -- Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

In **Luke 10:38**, Mary is there as a disciple of the teacher. And aren't all of you moms and dads of little girls thankful we follow one who cherished this believer?

Why Did Jesus First Send Women To Proclaim the Good News?

In **Matthew 27 & 28**, women are present at the death and the resurrection. They are the first Harbinger's and proclaimers of the good news. Jesus treated women as a person fully stamped with the image of God, and holy gifted by God for service in His Kingdom. He didn't see them in terms of gender, age and marital status, but in terms of their relationship with God.

Stanley Grins puts it so well he says, "**The Gospels liberation of women comes into full relief, only when we view the ministry of Jesus in the early Christian community in light of the strictures against women prevalent in the ancient Near East. From Galilee to Rome, the message of Jesus was a breath of fresh air that transformed the first century world.**"

God's Gives The Spirit to Men & Women To Launch His Restoration

And now on to the book of Acts with me - Acts 2. And I used to hear growing up about how important Acts 2 was. And now I believe that even more. For some of the old reasons but even more reasons beyond that because now I realized Luke was writing two volumes. And in them **he's getting people ready for the restoration of the people of God**, a time when Jews will come from all over the world to Jerusalem, and the Spirit of God will be poured out on them and **He would restore His people.**

That happens in Acts and it kind of gets launched with Peter preaching a sermon where he quotes the prophet Joel. He says in Acts 2:17 **"in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants both men and women, I will pour out my spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."**

Such a momentous event, and he announces the good news to all. **God is pouring out His Spirit on men and women, sons and daughters.**

Priscilla - Luke Shifts To Make Priscilla's Name Come First. Why?

And there's evidence of that in the book of Acts. Like Acts 18, where we read about Priscilla who along with her husband, instructs Apollos in the way of the Lord. Throughout the book of Acts and the writings of Paul, **Priscilla** is viewed as a ministry leader, an equal companion and co-worker in this teaching ministry.

Philips Four Prophetic Daughters -- Gifted To Speak for God

In **Acts 21:9**, we read about *the four daughters of Philip, who have the gift of prophecy.*

Paul - Commends Women Praying & Prophecying In Assembly

And then we turn to the letters of Paul. Starting in **1st Corinthians 11:5**,

Paul commends women who are praying and prophecying in the assembly. Now he's going to work on some of the ways that that's happening because he says in that culture, women need a head covering. **But he's not asking them to stop.**

Paul List of Women Leaders in Moving The Kingdom of God Forward

Read Romans 16:1-16

*I commend to you our sister **Phoebe**, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. ² I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.*

³ *Greet **Priscilla** and **Aquila**, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴ They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.*

What is the Significance of Priscilla's Name Being First? - Discover Why?

⁵ *Greet also the church that meets at their house.*

*Greet my dear friend **Epenetus**, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.*

⁶ *Greet **Mary**, who worked very hard for you.*

⁷ *Greet **Andronicus** and **Junia**, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.*

How can Junia be outstanding among the apostles?

What does this mean? Were women viewed as ministry leaders by Paul?

.....¹² *Greet **Tryphena** and **Tryphosa**, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend **Persis**, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.*

This long list of names that Paul's writing about are people beloved by him. He mentions **Phoebe** in verse two, who he says is a deaconess, or perhaps that should be translated servant. And she's a patron, probably a woman of high social standing and wealth who used what she had to minister to traveling Christians. Verse three he mentions Priscilla, we've already talked about her, along with her husband, risked her life for the cause of Christ. She established and maintained a house church, along with him.

Verse seven he mentions Junia. She is considered one of the apostles. Now, not one of the 12, but apostle in the broader sense, **somebody sent on a special mission by God.**

In **Philippians 4:3** he talks about Eudoia and Syntache. And he says these two women have been active with him and telling people about the gospel. and he calls them "sun-ergoy" (συνεργῶν), which means "fellow workers". (sun – "with" / ergon – work) It's a word that he associates with teaching and establishing new churches. A word he uses for Titus and Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Baptism Restores Male-Female Partnership Just Like In The Garden

And then you've got to believe that Paul ultimately thinking of a restored world order in **Galatians 3:27- 28** where he says, "**for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**

²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

Some would maybe say that that's just about unity and salvation but my question would be, "**Does he just want us to affirm unity and salvation, or should this be a theological truth that also affect practical living?**"

And so in summary of this big picture, rather than start with two restrictive passages, we started looking with the sweep of Scripture. And even though it was radical in that culture, **women were seen by Jesus, Peter and Paul as fully gifted by God. And so the words of Scripture come to men and women.**

God Doesn't Commission or Address His Church By Gender

Have you ever thought about that - the Great Commission to go and teach and make disciples and baptize, Who's that to? It's to all followers of Jesus isn't it, it's not just to men.

All the followers of Jesus are told to go be witnesses and to baptize people and, and to make disciples of them. Or what about 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 where it says, someone that's got a song let them share it as a gift to the church. Somebody that has a prayer of prophecy or a word, share that, let each one. **Do we really believe it means that or do we think Paul just intends for the men to speak.**

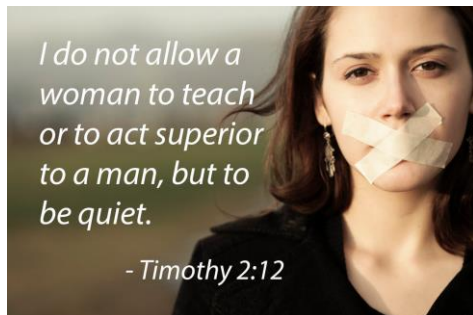
No, all the way through the New Testament, the church is being addressed. And the church is called into ministry, and it's not by race or gender but by calling and giftedness.

1 Peter 2:9-10 Does Peter Consider Both Men & Women Priest?

⁹*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* ¹⁰*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Restrictive Passages - How Do They Harmonize With What We See?

So now let's look at those two restricted passages. Just for a little bit.



³⁴**Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.** ³⁵**If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.**

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

I think these restricted passages are there for two reasons.

1. Context of a Larger Culture

One reason is the context of larger culture. The full inclusion of women and their public gatherings would have been a roadblock.

As I have already pointed out, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9, I'm going to do whatever it takes, so that people on the outside can have a hearing of the gospel. He didn't want any unnecessary roadblocks.

1 Corinthians 9:22-23

²²*To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.* ²³*I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

Today we kick around the phrase, a lot we got to give up our rights but what we often mean is, let's give up our rights so people won't be uncomfortable.

What Paul was talking about was giving up rights, so that unbelievers could hear the word.

As an example, let's talk about head coverings for a moment. I'm still not seeing many of you out there, ladies. But I bet I can picture a situation where you would wear a head covering.



Let's suppose Highland decided to plant a church in Afghanistan. And it was now a culture where it would be scandalous for a woman not to have a burka on. My bet is that every woman in this church would willingly put on a burka so that the gospel of Christ could be heard. That's what I bet.

Paul's Desire To Build Bridges That Connect People To God's Story

And I'd like to believe the men would be willing to do something uncomfortable for them as well. (Wouldn't you?)

You know something like that happened when CNN sent a female reporter over there. She said that she would not wear a burka because it symbolized the rejection of women and CNN's response was very fine, but you won't be reporting for us. She had one of those wonderful changes of heart.

But CNN was arguing, you can't go where we need you to go. You can't be in on conversations you need to be in on, because that's a culture that's expecting women to be covered like that.



And so, I'm not saying that in 1 Corinthians 11 we're just ignoring that, that's not it. We're not deciding which passages to follow which to ignore. We're trying to read them in their context. And there might well be parallel context where we do the same thing, so that the gospel can be heard.

And I know I know every one of the women in this congregation would willingly put on a head cover, if you were planning a church in Afghanistan so, the good news of Jesus Christ might be received. All the while knowing that that good news might eventually end up in the culture.

When you get a chance go through books like 1 Timothy and 1 Peter and look at how often Paul commands certain things so that they don't throw roadblocks up for people in hearing the gospel. But not today. We live in a very different world. Don't we. We routinely in our culture, see women and full participation.

Since I've lived in Texas we've had a woman who was a governor.

Now we have a woman who's senator. We're used to women being on boards of nonprofit organizations and Christian colleges. We're used to women being deans and co-workers. In fact, we're used to this 167 hours a week. It's that other one hour that we've had so much heartburn about.

And then I think it's maybe where the Muslims are more consistent. Part of what the Muslims, some of the more strict Muslims are fearing is that the West is bringing this liberating view of women, and they're arguing that there's no artificial distinction between what happens in the public gathering, what happens in all of life, and they think women ought to be in their homes, wrapped in a burka.

And they're fearful of that, I read a letter to the editor recently at the Atlanta newspaper by somebody saying Condoleezza Rice should not be appointed Secretary of State, because she's a woman. Some probably will get mad at that, but I'm probably thinking, that's at least more consistent. Somebody realizing that this 167 hour this way, and one hour this way is not going to work.

So, one of the reasons for these respective passages is the context of the larger culture, **Paul does not want a roadblock to be up to the hearing of the gospel.** But as I said, you keep that today. And then it does become a roadblock.

2. Context of Specific Local Situations In Corinth & Ephesus

The second reason is the context of specific local situations and now turn your Bibles to **1 Corinthians 14:26-33**. (Reading Added)

Good Order in Worship

²⁶ *What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.* ²⁷ *If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.* ²⁸ *If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.*

²⁹ *Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.* ³⁰ *And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.* ³¹ *For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.* ³² *The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.* ³³ *For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.*

Here you can tell a kind of chaos has broken out in their assemblies. So, three times in verses 28, 30 and 34, Paul uses the same Greek word which means be quiet. The first time he speaks to tongue speakers, the second time to prophets, and the third time to some women who kept asking questions.

Now as hard as we study this text I'm quite certain, we've got too much distance to know exactly how that was looking. But for some reason, probably the only way that chaos could be controlled was to tell some people you got to lock it down.

Tongue Speakers	Be Quiet
Prophets	Be Quiet
Wives	Be Quiet (Ask at home!)

We need an assembly with order; we need a place where people can be edified and not just chaos.

Does that mean Paul never wants a tongue speaker to speak? -- NO! We know otherwise. Does that mean he never wants prophecy? -- NO.

And does that then become a rule for all times that no woman can ever say anything in an assembly? -- NO!

That's what got us into the situation where women couldn't even sing. That there is this specific context where he has to call for fitting and orderly service.

I think **Carol Osbourne** is right when he wrote,

Paul's corrective does not ban women from speaking in public, but stops the disruptive verbal misconduct of certain wives who are giving free rein to irresistible impulses to pipe up at will, with questions in the assembly by redirecting these questions to another setting, where they can gain access to information without causing chaos. Referring, as it does to a very specific problem of disruptive questions by these women, 1 Corinthians 14:34 - 35 teaches that these particular wives, like the uncontrolled tongue speakers and prophets at Corinth, must defer to the assembly by voluntarily yielding to orderliness. The general principle that's to be applied to contemporary church life is that decorum is mandatory for all in the public assembly without regard for gender.

Now turn to First Timothy chapter two.

1 Timothy 2:8-15 -

⁸Therefore I want the **men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands** without anger or disputing. ⁹I also want the **women to dress modestly**, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

¹¹A **woman should learn in quietness and full submission**. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. [The other restrictive text is in verses 11 and following.]

And when I read First Timothy, I take what Paul said in First Timothy 1:3 to be the literal truth that the reason Paul left Timothy in Ephesus, was the deal with all the false teaching with people with obsessed with mythology and genealogy, that was leading people astray. That that really was the reason he left Timothy.

And when you read 1 and 2 Timothy you realize that that has happened from the inside; it was an inside job in the church. False teachers were leading people away from the good news. And as you read passages like 1 Timothy 2:9-15, 6:11-15, & 2 Timothy 3:6-7, it starts to become clear that these teachers had considerable influence among some women, especially young widows.

Now remember what I said earlier about First Timothy 5:9, don't help a widow who's under 60. That starts to become more clear than Paul probably wouldn't say that at all time for all people, but in that situation where false teaching is about to dismantle the church, and it's coming into the homes of young women, young widows especially, you can understand that some things he needs to say in that situation, that wouldn't be said in all places at all times.

And in this, in chapter two, is a prohibition of women doing something but that doesn't necessarily tell us if it's Paul's word for all time. It is a ban on a Ephesian women teaching because they were involved in heresy. And because they were doing it in a domineering way.

Again, **Carol Osbourne** says,

"We still need to hear the word about modesty and appropriateness of dress. But on the specifics most, evangelicals long ago yielded to cultural change, almost certainly Paul himself did not intend these instructions to address all Christians and all churches universally. All of these instructions including 2: 11-12 were ad hoc responses to the waywardness of the young widows in emphasis, who'd already gone astray after Satan and were disrupting the church."

It simply cannot be demonstrated that Paul intended 1 Timothy 2:11-12, as a rule in all churches at all times. In fact, the occasion and purpose of 1 Timothy as a whole, and these verses in particular suggest otherwise. And again, I think he's exactly right.

My dear brothers and sisters these changes we've made have been with great regard for reading scripture and for living under its authority. And it's been done for the sake of the gospel.

Not every woman is going to want to participate this way. That's fine. It's always been that way with men. But God is leading us in new ways to be a blessing to the world, to call all people to him, and this issue I've talked about today, that's not going to be our central identity. I'd hate it if years from now, someone said oh yeah Mike was here some of years and I'll tell you what he helped us do. If we ever make this our central identity we've erred.

It's more a part of the journey, that's breaking out as God draws us more and more into his work in this world. **He calls us into authentic community for the sake of the world, to live a way of mercy and justice in this world.** So more and more we're asking God to send us into this world he loves. Let's pray together.

PRAYER:

Oh God please bless these words. Let them be heard in a gentle way. I pray that just as there is one loaf, we may be one body in Jesus Christ, and find and cherish our unity and diversity. And I do pray God that you will keep pouring us out as your servants of this world and mold us and use us.

Because you love this world so much you gave your only begotten son for whom we pray, And again we all say thank you.

Pastoral Encouragement

And now just a few words of pastoral encouragement to you. What we've done is created some pain. But what I learned recently in our 75th anniversary, is pain is a part of the history of this church.

This church is determined through its history that we cannot walk the path of least resistance. That happened many times in the past, when the herald of truth ministry was started the attacks were constant and vicious. People say you can't support a ministry that way.

But I was reminded again that my brothers and sisters before me, held on because they were convinced it was the leading of God.

And when a more open approach to the Holy Spirit came here, when we decided that we wouldn't teach that the Holy Spirit is bound to this book, but it's still alive and working among us.

I wasn't here but some of you were when you watched friends and family walk out and start a new church. And I can't imagine how that hurt.

And when the elders made a decision again before I was here that the divorce, did not alone disqualify a man from serving as a deacon. That was explosive. But they opted not to go the way of least resistance.

And so, let me ask a few questions here at the end today.

1. Why Didn't We Just Wait This Out - Just Let Time Take Care of This?

First, I know some are wondering, why didn't we just wait this out, why not just let time take care of this.

And again, I'll let Martin Luther King answer that from his letter from the Birmingham jail. He pointed out time, does it ever take care of things? Like that time doesn't take care of racism. Bold moves by convicted people bring about change not time.

It happens over time because both people make drastic changes.

We can't wait it out because of our belief that the gospel is seeking to produce a community without barriers, which is a witness to the world. And because of the growing dichotomy to people who may be peeking in.

Can Go There Because It Feels Like A "Boys Club"

I got a letter from somebody telling me that she and her husband invited a longtime friend of hers to church. They asked later what her friends impressions were she said the singing was good the preaching was timely and relevant, but she just didn't think she could go back because it felt like a boys club.

And she wanted to know did the church feel like women were inferior? Did they think she was inferior? To her it was like dropping in on an Amish community or going to a church where blacks were asked to sit in the balcony.

We can't wait.

Because we, we believe we've been nudge this way by God.

What About Family Members Who Disagree?

My guess is that those who've been at Highland for a long time have faced this before on other things. And it's nothing new. For a long time, some have had family members who wouldn't come with them because of the worship style, or because of a praise team or because of something I said at the Tulsa workshop or something. But that doesn't mean that we ought to ignore that it's still fresh with many of you and it's painful.

So, let me tell you a story. A friend of mine here who will remain anonymous and I'm not talking about me. Really, somebody else in this church, went home for Christmas break, and was sort of accosted by his father, who was offended that his son was going to a church where women were now doing things in the public assembly.

And he said they made great progress, because he tried to do two things.

1 First of all he spoke to his father about congregational autonomy and

some of you maybe don't even know what that is, but it's a part of the DNA of churches of Christ. What it means is, and we heard this a lot growing up, that we don't have a church, one church that's in charge of all the rest of us. There's not one board, one Bishop, that we are a congregation with its own leadership. And he spoke to his father about how he's grown to appreciate that.

His father softened, and said, You're right. I trust that there are godly people they're seeking the way of Christ, just like we are.

And the second thing he tried to do,.....

2 and this may seem like a minimal approach, but he tried to convince

his father, that this is not a ridiculous reading of Scripture. He tried to help him see that this is a position you might not agree with, but it's not a ridiculous position. It's one that many God loving people hold to, and this is significant, even the most conservative people in other traditions.

I remember the first time our family went to Africa. I guess my second trip to Africa. We went and visited a lot of those village churches, and I was shocked that there were women leading singing and saying prayers and reading scripture, and afterwards I asked one of the missionaries, a dear friend of ours, to explain to me how that could happen in that highly patriarchal culture.

And she said that when they first got there she asked the same thing after one of the first assembly she got one of the men aside and asking, she said, I'm surprised that women are doing these things. She said, "I'm surprised your wife is reading scripture." And he says, I tell her to read she reads.

But she was struck by the fact that even in that very hierarchical culture they would understand that that didn't mean that those gifts were not to be shared.

And so, what he said was at the end he and his father actually grew in their relationship because they decided that they would agree to disagree. And guess what, that's what healthy families do.

It's not a healthy family that has to agree on everything. It's a healthy family that can finally say, Hey, I love you and I trust you. We'll just have to disagree on this one.

There's a new book coming out from one of the members of this church I'm not going to mention who's writing it or the title yet because it's not out, but I'll tell you more about it later. And he's just pleading for Christians and for churches to learn to agree to disagree without marking each other, to let discussions be add without impugning motives without wondering what's behind that, and I cannot wait for this book to come out I think it may be one of the most timely books that could come.

The next question.

What About Those With Doubts and Questions?

Well if you're one of those with doubts and questions about this, let me remind you, and all of us, that being right on this issue is not what makes us the people of God.

Being right with God is an act of his marvelous grace. He has redeemed us restored us and called us into community to live for Him in ways of love, compassion, forgiveness and justice in this world.

And I guess, I'd add, if being right on this issue is of eternal consequence, then we're going to be a very nervous people when it comes time to die because there'll be a lot of things that we would have had to get right.

But thank God we don't, we live with confidence, because our salvation is built on the blood of Jesus Christ.

And I think I would say to you as well, this is a chance, like people before you who disagreed when we were kind of a faithful minority. But what I'm suggesting is that we flip it upside down. Is it possible to see people with doubts and questions as a gift to the church, instead of a drag on the church?

Isn't it very often people like this, who force us to be humble and to continue searching, remembering that we have not completely arrived. So, to those with doubts and questions. I just welcome you again today as a gift to this church.

And then the question but what about discomfort.

What If I Am Just Not Comfortable With This?

What about if I am just not comfortable with it and I know that's fair. I remember, probably, it was when Matt was about 9 or 10 years old, we went to New York City and visited a church where women got up to read scripture and pray. And when that happened he looked at me like, you're a minister, what are you going to do about this. And I know at the time he had no verse in mind, but it wasn't church as he was accustomed. And it just felt wrong.

Some of you will remember the story I've told before it's Stephen Covey tells about all the arguments, he and his wife had through the years about what kind of appliance to buy.

He said that he would use criteria like cost and effectiveness as judged by Consumer Reports and so on. And she would always want a Frigidaire.

I mean, at the end of the argument she wanted the Frigidaire, so they kept buying Frigidaire. It upset him. And then one day they were on a long drive.

And she started, revealing a story she'd even forgot. She grew up in a family with a father who was an appliance repairman, and during the Great Depression, only one company paid their bills. Would you like to guess, Frigidaire.

And when she told that part of the story, light bulbs went off with both of them. That's it. That's why in these subterranean chambers she's had these convictions about Frigidaire all these years, because they provided food for her family to eat when nobody else did.

In being uncomfortable, let's **be careful about using the language of giving up rights**, I think we need to use that language but appropriately. But one side might say why can't they give up their rights because of my discomfort and the other side might say, well why don't you give up your right to comfort for the sake of the body.

The larger issue when we're talking about that language, is usually we are willing to stretch a bit so that **we don't put up an extra hurdle for those who are unbelievers**.

It reminds us why we need deep friendships where this discomfort can be talked about openly. When it can be examined and it can be prayed for. It may be a chance to grow in your love for others, to decide not to resent others or to question their motives. But to love them, even though they're different. And that'll be a big gain, if we can get beyond conspiracy theories and just love each other.

And somebody might say, "Well I agree, but I really don't want to serve. And that's fine. As I said before, a lot of men have made the decision and are still obviously servants of God in the fullest sense.



But there's a wonderful little letter that a woman wrote that Malibu church. Distributed when they started including women and in some of these public roles. She said,....

When I was a child growing up in Middle Tennessee and we would all gather together as a large clan, the custom was to have first table second table and third table to eat.

The adults ate first which meant that those of us who were young had the responsibility of waiting on the table. We were to watch the table from the sides of the dining room and replenish the bowls that needed to be replenished and bring from the kitchen whatever anyone requested. And then we would do for the younger adults, the same thing until finally, we could eat what was left in the kitchen. Usually what was called the third table.

At our own home, we lived with my grandparents and my parents and because there were three of us girls we were trained and expected to wait on the table. Again it was our duty to fetch and carry what was needed and to try to do that without being asked. In other words, we were to be watchful and courteous and helpful and anticipate the needs of adults who would prepare the meal.

At church though, it was the men who waited on the Lord's table. And I remember thinking, that was different, but I never questioned the custom.

Just like I never questioned any of the customs required of me at my home growing up. At potlucks, I joined in with the women to shoo the flies away from the food and make sure the men were given plenty of time to eat and enjoy and see that the babies were fed and happy. I waited the tables before we began, to see what each person had brought that was so mouth watering good.

After college I married and began my own hospitality. I wanted to be the best wife ever and so it didn't occur to me to have my husband helped me in the kitchen or help with the table. That was just not done in southwest Missouri. And so when our girls were born we continued the practice of waiting tables for our guests and for him. When we went to church, the men waited on the table but the women did not.

Then we moved to Southern California into the Malibu church and the elders began to meet with the women of the church, and to study the Scriptures for months and for years. And wouldn't you know it was just as they came to agreement that women could also wait on the Lord's table, my neurologist discovered that I had an essential tremor in my hands, which made waiting the trays impossible without spilling them on someone.

And so, I'm one who has waited on tables, all of my life, but never the Lord table. And you see for me waiting on the table of the Lord would be a great honor.

I love that! She doesn't reject her past, she doesn't throw arrows at those churches, she just says it's a new day. And I want us all to participate.

Closing Thoughts

My dear brothers and sisters let's assume the best of each other, no conspiracy theories okay. Know what's behind this or know this is just not about a few power hungry women.

It's so delicate. Culture runs so deep. When we use the phrase "it's just culture," we don't understand how deep culture is and the deepest part of culture has to do with family.

And this is tied up with so much that's emotional it's tied up with, with the choices women have made - some staying home with children some having careers choices about how we're educating some homeschooling some sending kids to homes. It has to do with how we do family. It's such a touchy thing. It's a great experience for us to learn to love one another, even when it's uneasy. Because my dear friends, we are the body of Christ. There is one loaf. And we are one body. Let's stand and sing.