

The Ministry of Christian Women

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, tonight we come to the fourth and last in this little series of sermons I've been preaching on the ministry of Christian women. Before I start, let me just say this, that I'm conscious there will be inevitably questions, important questions arising in people's minds, and some of those you might want to discuss with me, and I'm very happy to talk things over.

I'm a bear of fairly small brain, so I won't promise to answer all questions, but I'm very happy to discuss them. And I'll be down there near the tea trolleys, which is my usual place after the service, and if you want to talk to me, please do come and approach me and discuss whatever you'd like to arising out of these studies and Bible passages.

Well, now, we'll be turning in just a moment to this lovely passage in Titus chapter 2 that was read a few minutes ago, but before we do that, I'd like us to turn back briefly, if we may to 1 Timothy chapter 2 and verses 9 to 15, which is on page 991 in the big Bibles, if you have those.

That was our passage last time we were studying this subject, and I want to go back here because the 1 Timothy 2 passage helps us with the question of women's ordination, and that's something I haven't specifically touched on yet in this series, but I do think it needs at least a little bit of treatment.

So let's look at 1 Timothy chapter 2. Now, as I finished my sermon a fortnight ago, I said that this passage in 1 Timothy chapter 2 expresses certain limitations or restrictions on the role of Christian women, and that the Titus 2 passage opens up the rich and varied possibilities of women's ministry.

[1 : 37] Now, it's the restrictions of 1 Timothy chapter 2 which particularly bear upon the question of women's ordination. Now, I know that women have been ordained to parish ministry, the regular ministry of the Church of Scotland, for some time, and the same is true of the Church of England, which is where I come from.

Speaking of the Anglican scene in England, pressure within the Church of England for women to be ordained began to be felt, I think, about 40 years ago. That pressure grew during the 1970s and 1980s, and I guess it was much the same in the Church of Scotland, but in England, the General Synod decided in the early 1990s, I think it was in 1992, to begin ordaining women to the parish ministry.

Now, in the first few years of women's ordination, ordained women were naturally assistant ministers or curates in English parishes. But by the late 1990s, some of them began to take vicars or rectors' posts, and more recently, some of the most able and dedicated of these women have been made archdeacons.

An archdeacon in the English system is a kind of senior diocesan role akin to that of an assistant bishop. And the General Synod of the Church of England, the governing and decision-making body, is now facing the question of whether some ordained women should be made bishops.

And it looks as though they're going to agree to this change. So what should we make of all this in both the Church of Scotland and the Church of England in the light of 1 Timothy 2, and also in the light of Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 3 that we've been studying in the last few weeks?

[3 : 17] Well, 1 Timothy 2, verses 11 and 12, if you'd cast your eye with me to those verses again, they make the point that a woman should not teach or have authority over a man.

And in that instruction, Paul the Apostle is reflecting the lessons of Genesis 2 and Genesis 3. In the Garden of Eden, the rebellion was not simply the rebellion of mankind against the authority of God. It was certainly that, but it was more complex than that. It was also a rebellion against the God-given order and structure of human relationships. So Adam's sin lay not only in disobeying God's command, but also in abdicating his responsibility as the leader and following his wife's lead.

So in Genesis chapter 3, the God-given original order of man first, woman second, and serpent as a member of the lower orders of creation third, that order is stood on its head and is replaced by serpent first, because he's now controlling events.

He is, in Jesus' language, now the prince of this world. Serpent first, the woman second, and the man third, because he is now doing as his wife suggests in eating the forbidden fruit.

[4 : 37] Now the teaching of Paul the Apostle in the New Testament is that the church, as a foretaste of heaven, as God's new society, should reflect the original order, the order of Genesis chapter 2.

So Paul's teaching restores man to his role as the leader and teacher, and woman to her role as the helper. And it's that which accounts for Paul's reasoning in verses 13 and 14 of 1 Timothy chapter 2, which I'll read again.

Having just said he doesn't permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, he then gives the reason, for Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

So if we place our able women in the churches into a position where they are leading and teaching churches as vicars or rectors in the Anglican system or senior ministers in the Church of Scotland or bishops in the Anglican system, I think we have to conclude that we are repeating the error of Genesis chapter 3.

An error which the Bible treats not simply as an intellectual misjudgment, but as a moral rebellion. So how is it that our churches, the churches of England and Scotland, have got themselves into our present position?

[6 : 01] The answer must be that they have been listening to that core doctrine of secular feminism, which insists that men and women are not only equal in status, but are also identical in role and function.

The Bible teaches, remember, that the two sexes have an equality of status, but a difference of function. So if women's ordination means that women are to be vicars or rectors or senior ministers who regularly teach adult men, and now perhaps in the Church of England also to be bishops who have a leading and teaching authority over a whole diocese, the Bible surely counsels us to say no to that kind of ministry, however able and hardworking and sincere those particular women may be. If, however, women's ordination were to mean that suitable women were authorised to a Titus chapter 2 sort of role, I think we'd want to say a resounding yes.

Inevitably, ministers get asked the question, what do you think of women's ordination? And over the years, I've found it useful to reply something like this. I tend to say I'm not in favour of women's ordination, but I'm very much in favour of women's ministry, because the Bible is.

And when my questioner then asks me to explain myself more fully, I try to show them the contrast between 1 Timothy 2 and Titus 2. 1 Timothy 2 counsels us against women's ordination, in the way that it's currently understood in the churches of England and Scotland, but Titus chapter 2 unfolds for us a great programme of women's ministry, which we're going to look at in just a moment.

[7 : 44] I wonder if, in a sense, the temptation that our churches of England and Scotland have fallen into is almost a rerun of the Garden of Eden temptation.

In the Garden of Eden, God said to Adam and Eve, there is all this that you can do and enjoy. You've got the peaches, the plums, the pears, the pawpaws, the pomegranates and the passion fruit.

Enjoy all of it, but there is one fruit that you mustn't eat. And yet that is the one fruit that they decided they must eat. Isn't this similar to the situation with women's ministry?

There is such a variety of ministry for women to do, but there is one thing, having authority over men and teaching them, which a woman is told not to do. And yet that is the one thing that our churches and other denominations have decided that we must do.

I said a month ago that there are aspects of modern secular feminism that Christians concur with very happily. For example, votes for women, university education for women, and a revulsion against pornography and prostitution.

[8 : 51] But the core commitment of secular feminism to the view that men and women ought to have identical and interchangeable functions and roles, that can only be seen through Bible eyes as a repetition of the sin of Genesis chapter 3.

All right, well let's turn on now to Titus chapter 2 on page 998 in our Bibles. And as your eye runs down the whole of this chapter, you'll see that it's a chapter with a very obvious theme.

And that is the theme of teaching. In fact, this chapter is like a great sandwich. The two slices of bread are verse 1, but as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

And then verse 15, these then are the things that you should teach, or declare and exhort these things. And verses 2 to 14 are what you might call the layers of burger and lettuce and onion and barbecue sauce.

That is to say, the content of Titus' teaching as he looks after and pastors the Christian congregations on the island of Crete. And the teaching theme penetrates every layer of this big sandwich.

[10:02] The theme comes out a bit more clearly, the theme of teaching, in the New International version, if you have that. And so I'll read the verses out as they are in the NIV. Verse 2 says, teach the older men certain things.

Then verse 3, teach the older women certain other things. You'll notice again, it's just another example of the way in which the men and the women are treated differently, as they are throughout scripture.

And then reading on, end of verse 3, the older women are to teach what is good. Verse 4, then they'll be able to train, or teach, the younger women.

Verse 6, urge the younger men, or teach the younger men, encourage them. Different word, but it carries the same thrust. Verse 7, in your teaching, show integrity.

Then verse 9, teach slaves certain things. Verse 10, Paul mentions the teaching or the doctrine about God our Savior. And verse 12, the grace of God teaches us, or trains us, to say no to ungodliness.

[11:07] So you can't mistake the flavor of this great club sandwich. It has several layers, and each layer is different, but each layer is about the content of what should be taught in the Christian churches.

Let me just add a little incidental aside at this moment, while we're thinking of the subject of teaching. If you ever have to move house, and some of you undoubtedly will have to do that in the near future, and you're looking for a new church somewhere, you've gone to Penzance, or Inverness, or wherever it may be, make sure that you find a church that is serious about teaching the gospel, teaching the content of the Bible, teaching Christian ethics.

Otherwise, it won't be a New Testament church. Teaching is always at the heart of a church that is founded upon the Bible. So, Titus chapter 2, it's all about teaching, and in verse 1, Paul insists that Titus' teaching is not to be about anything and everything, it's to be controlled and disciplined by being what accords with sound doctrine.

Sound simply means healthy, or health-giving. So this is to be teaching drawn from the Bible, and disciplined by the Bible, and this will promote healthy godliness in those who give it, and in those who receive it.

So I want us to focus on the section of verses 3, 4, and 5, which is about older women and younger women. I won't ask you to put your hands up if you fit into one category or the other, but ladies, of course, you will know which of those two categories you belong to, even if I can't tell from this distance.

[12:39] So we'll take the material now broadly under two headings, and then we'll have some final points of practical application. So here's our first main heading. The prior qualification for a woman to teach.

It's there in verse 3. Older women, likewise, are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good.

So the qualification for an older woman to teach is reverence of behavior. That's the positive thing. And then negatively, she is to avoid slander and drunkenness.

Now, Paul the Apostle is using his words carefully here, as he always does, and his careful words describe a very interesting scenario. Titus is clearly the main teacher, if you like, the head teacher of the congregations in Crete.

So in verse 2, Titus is to teach the older men certain things. In verse 6, Titus is to teach the younger men certain things. In verse 9, Titus is to teach church members who are slaves.

[13:49] In verse 3, Titus is to teach the older women. But who teaches the younger women? Not Titus. Verse 4, it is the older women who are to teach and train the younger women.

Why not Titus? Well, Paul doesn't spell out the reason, but it may well be twofold. First of all, to help Titus to avoid sexual temptation. And secondly, because the older women will make a much better job of it than Titus would, because they know what the younger women, what their life is like.

So let's look at this qualification for a woman to teach. And you'll see it's there in verse 3. Teach the older women to be reverent in their behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine.

Now what does this idea of reverence of behavior mean? One of my commentaries suggests that reverence of behavior means practicing the presence of God, living out your whole life in the knowledge that the Lord God is right there with you, lovingly watching you and encouraging you to live a life that pleases Him.

In other words, a way of life that is transparent, both to God and to other people. Now let me ask, can you think of Christian women who are like that? Well, of course you can.

[15:07] We've all met many. imitate them, sisters, and you'll be qualified for women's ministry. Now the next part of verse 3 helps to define this reverence of behavior more clearly.

Such women are not slanderers. In other words, they've come to a decision, they've come to a point in their lives, a resolution, not to be backbiters or scandal mongers. They've renounced the habit of speaking ill of other people.

And then verse 3, although it's perfectly legitimate to enjoy a glass of wine from time to time, these women are deeply aware that heavy regular drinking and serving the Lord are two things that cannot go together.

In fact, Paul may well be linking slander with excessive drinking, because too much alcohol can easily loosen tongues and make it easier for us to speak ill of other people.

And there's one more facet of the qualification for women's ministry, and that is in the final phrase of verse 3. They're to teach what is good. So if an older woman wants not only to be reverent in her behavior and to avoid the traps of slander and heavy drinking, but also wants to teach good things, then we know that she is a woman who has a desire to fulfill a vital role.

[16:30] She's not somebody who's simply wanting to live for herself and to please herself. She has an eye for other people, to do them good by teaching them. So she has a sense of responsibility towards other Christian women.

And let's notice Paul's logic in verses 3 and 4. It's expressed in the first phrase of verse 4, the phrase, and so. So if Titus teaches the older women to be reverent in their behavior, etc., etc., and to teach what is good, that is so that they will then be qualified, they'll be in the right position, to train the younger women.

So it's holiness of living, godliness of life, that qualifies a woman to teach other women. Well, so much for the qualification for a woman to teach. Now, I'm sure that some of you women are wondering whether you're older or younger.

Paul is not specific. He doesn't say that older age begins at a certain point in life. And the reason for this is probably because maturity has more to do with personal experience than with a precise number of years.

Imagine the situation where you have a 17-year-old girl who is good friends with a 24-year-old married woman who has two young children.

[17:48] Now, that 24-year-old married woman is still a very young woman by anyone's standards. But she knows a great deal more about life and marriage and parenthood than her 17-year-old friend.

So although she's only 24, she can fulfill the role of older woman teacher to her young Christian friend. So it's a relative thing. Now, what kind of teaching and training does Paul have in mind? Is it formal training? Is he setting up a kind of program for church, the 7.30 meeting in the church halls on a Wednesday evening? Good evening, ladies, and welcome.

Our subject tonight is interior decoration. Is it that sort of thing that he's got in mind? Of course, today's world is full of training courses, isn't it? There are training courses leaping up everywhere these days.

You can even go to training courses on how to keep hens in the back garden. It is true. Trust me, I know. Now, almost certainly, Paul the Apostle didn't have in mind that kind of formal classroom training when he speaks here of the older women training the younger ones.

[18:52] Not that there's anything inappropriate about that. There are special women's evenings from time to time in our church, and perhaps training is involved in those evenings, and that's a very good thing.

But as we look at verses 4 and 5, I think we'll be nearer the mark if we imagine this training taking place informally as Christian women talk together in their own homes or in other regular meeting places, church or school or wherever it may be.

The format of the training is not important. What is important to Paul is that training is taking place in the life of the local church as Christian women lovingly take responsibility for each other and develop within their fellowship, within their church, a culture of training one another in godly living. So sisters, let me ask, are you registering the fact that you need to be a trainer? It's all part of being a Christian woman. Now let's move to our second main heading, which is the content of a Christian woman's teaching.

Let me read verses 4 and 5 because it's all there in those two verses. And so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

[20 : 18] And you see Paul's motive there at the end of verse 5, so that the word of God may not be reviled. That is an interesting piece of reasoning. What Paul means is that if the younger women don't live life in a verse 4 and verse 5 way, outsiders, non-Christians, are going to speak badly about what?

About them? About their church? No, about the word of God. So if people outside the Christian fellowship see young Christian women scorning their husbands, neglecting their children, failing to live a life of self-control and purity, and domestic industriousness and kindness, they're going to speak badly of the Bible.

They'll say, that Bible, it isn't worth the paper it's printed on. Have you seen that young Mrs. Smith from number 33? Her children are dirty, she shouts at her husband every day, her home's in a tip. Christians say that the Bible is powerful. Well, Mrs. Smith belongs to the church, and the Bible hasn't, obviously not done anything to change her life. And of course, if people start maligning the word of God, that is to speak ill of God himself, and to suggest that his words have no power to change our lives.

But we know they have great power to change lives. So let's subdivide the content of this teaching now into five sections. First, marriage. And so, train the younger women to love their husbands, verse 4, and then verse 5, to be submissive to their husbands.

[21 : 51] Now there's a surprising implication here. If the younger women need to be trained to love their husbands, it means that they don't naturally know how to love them.

In our society, we somehow assume that when boy meets girl, and they fall in love and then get married, they know all about how to love each other. But the fact is, they don't.

And the first few months, first few years, of a young woman's married life can be really quite difficult. Think of the typical young woman. For all her life so far, up to being 20, 25, 30, or whenever she gets married, she's been doing this and that.

She's been as free as a bird. She's been carving her niche. She's been learning about work and society and how to make the best of her talents. And now, all of a sudden, there's this, there's this man.

And he looms rather large in her life. At times, he's very demanding, especially with food and sex. he seems to need such large helpings of both.

[22 : 56] And at other times, he's just not there. And she wants him to be, but he's not. And she doesn't seem to understand why he's not at home. So anyway, this goes on for a bit. And then she visits her older Christian woman friend.

And the friend says to her, how's married life? Is it a bed of roses? And she says, well, it's quite nice. It's okay, I suppose.

So the older woman picks up the hint and she says, I'm going to go into the kitchen and put the kettle on. You come in and sit down. And then, the training begins to take place over the teacups and the carrot cake.

It's completely informal and unstructured. It happens in the context of a loving friendship. But it happens because the older woman has been reading her Titus 2 and she knows her responsibility. And this can be enormously helpful to the younger Christian woman. I've met Christian women, older women, who have said, if only I knew 20 or 30 years ago what I know now, if only somebody had come alongside me and told me a few things, life would have been much smoother.

[24 : 04] Now these verses are showing us that the young Christian married woman doesn't naturally know how to love her husband or how to be submissive to him. Her natural tendency will

be to boss him about.

But she is trained in marriage not by the pastor but by her older woman friends. They're the ones who've been through the same experiences and the loving advice that they can give is much more supportive and also much more challenging than any advice that a male pastor could give them.

So do you see how there are some areas of ministry which can only be done by men but there are others like this one which are to be done only by women? Titus can teach the older women but it's then their responsibility to teach and train the younger ones.

So marriage first. I'll be much briefer on the other four. The second one is child rearing. There it is in verse 4. Train the younger women to love their children. Now rearing children and loving children is at one level a very joyful responsibility but at another level it is a 20 year commitment to hard labor. Isn't that right? It can even be a 30 year commitment if you have a strung out family. And a mother's courage can flag and the experienced woman friend can be like a shot of adrenaline to her as she draws alongside her and helps her with the teaching and training and loving of her children.

[25 : 33] Thirdly, self-control and purity. Now Paul the Apostle probably has sexual temptation chiefly in mind at this point. the older woman can sometimes notice when her younger friend might be tempted to have an affair.

She can spot the danger signs and lovingly step in and help her younger friend to see how vital it is to be faithful in marriage even when the husband is not a lot of fun to be with.

Fourth, Paul speaks about being busy at home. Now we need not think that Paul is insisting that married women stay at home. After all, Paul knew his Old Testament very well and he knew the picture of the excellent wife in Proverbs 31, the wife who has a huge variety of roles and work outside the home.

So Paul is not saying that work outside the home is inappropriate. He's counselling the older women to help the younger women to run their homes well. And running a home well is a very difficult thing.

How does a young woman keep the house clean and feed the family well and look after the pets and look after the garden and the shopping and the ironing and the washing? And even if her husband significantly helps her and it is to be hoped that he will, she still has a great deal on her plate and her older female friends can help her to organise things so that muddle and anarchy give way to peace and good order.

[27 : 03] And then fifth, to be kind. Is Paul hinting here that unkindness is a peculiarly female temptation? It's very hard to think that he is. Maybe in the context of his thoughts about home life he's thinking of how good it is when a woman is hospitable, when she creates the kind of home that others want to come to because they know that they will be welcomed there and loved.

Well let me, time is almost up but let me just draw one or two threads together now. Paul is teaching Titus and us that women have this distinctive and very important ministry of training other women. Some of the training will be formal and will involve teaching the Bible to women and of course to children as well. Some women are excellent Bible teachers and a good and well led woman's Bible study group or training group can be a huge blessing to its members.

God is not telling us that women can't be Bible teachers. The point is that women ought not to exercise a Bible teaching ministry over men because that is to reproduce the error of Genesis chapter 3.

But women teaching women is not only good it is essential. But women teaching women is not just a matter of words it is a matter of example.

[28 : 21] It's the life that teaches godliness as well as the tongue. So this means that each Christian woman is able to be a model. Ladies do you think of yourself as a model?

You might be 95 but tomorrow morning look at yourself in the mirror and say I'm a model. I have the privilege and the responsibility of modelling the Christian life to younger Christian women.

This is a job that someone like me can't do or Willie Philip can't do because we're men. But sisters you can do it and as you teach and train and encourage one another and as the church develops more and more a culture of the women taking responsibility for each other the church the congregation will become immeasurably richer and stronger.

Some of this training will be formal but most of it will be informal and unscripted arising out of loving friendships. The Titus 2 passage is not exhaustive.

