

Sermon—February 6-7, 1999

Rich and Marlene Nathan

Christ Confronts the Culture Series

1 Tim. 2:9-15

Christ Confronts Feminism

Rich

I have been doing a series called “Christ Confronts the Culture” in which I have been trying to tackle a lot of the dominating issues and thought processes that govern our culture. I do this so that you might have a biblical framework, a biblical way to understand what Christians really think about such as evolution or postmodernism. I want to give you some language and framework for understanding these various things.

Today I have the special privilege of sharing the pulpit with my wife, Marlene, as we tackle one of the most controversial subjects, not only in the larger culture, but also in the church today and that is the subject of feminism. I have had a number of people come up to me during the week with pitying voices. They put their arm around me and say, “Well, Rich, I am sure it will work out for you to speak on this. You are a lot more courageous than me.” But honestly, I believe that the Bible speaks to the whole of life and there is no subject that a pastor should shy away from in instructing the church. Truly, before God, when all is said and done, I want to be able to give a good report that I have given you the whole counsel of God so far as I understand it at my present stage of maturity and my present stage of understanding. But it has always been my desire to build a biblical church. And so even if the topic is controversial, it seems to me that it gives all the more reason why you ought to hear about it taught here at church.

Now, I want to begin this teaching on feminism by speaking to you about Jesus' attitude toward women because we can't fully appreciate the New Testament's teaching about women without understanding the cultural setting that the sayings of Jesus and the behaviors of Jesus and the statements of the apostle Paul were made. First of all, we could simply say that the New Testament world, both in Jewish culture as well as in Greek and Roman culture, was in every sense a man's world. A Jewish writer named Ben Sirach, who wrote the book "Ecclesiasticas," which is not the biblical book Ecclesiastes, but the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticas, which appears in the Catholic Bible. Ben Sirach wrote in 200 BC and there are five or six passages in that book that are unbelievably negative toward women. For example, Ben Sirach says, "Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who is good." Josephus, who is a Jewish historian who lived just shortly after Jesus wrote, "The woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to a man."

Now the law never said such a thing. But this was the general view of Jews living in Jesus' time. That in all things women were inferior to men. And then the Jewish Talmud, which, of course, was written after the time of Jesus had incorporates in and reflects back the teachings of rabbis who lives at the time of Jesus, boldly says that a hundred women are no better than two men. One rabbi said, "The world cannot exist without males and females, but happy is he who children are males and woe to him whose children are females." Another rabbi said, "A man is bound to say the following prayer daily, 'Blessed art thou who has not made me a Gentile, an animal or a woman.'"

Women in the Talmud were frequently used as examples of negative traits. At the time of Jesus it was completely improper for a man to speak to a woman in public. Women could not testify in court because they were not thought to be credible witnesses. The rabbis forbid the teaching of the Torah, the teaching of the Jewish law, to women. Women could

not sit and learn the Bible. Rabbi Eleazer said he would burn the Torah rather than instruct women in its truths.

In Jewish life husbands could get divorces from their wives, but the wives could not divorce their husbands. Women in Judaism had a very restricted role in the culture. The rabbis continually poked fun at women. For example, Deborah and Hulda, who in the Old Testament were prophetesses and leaders of the nation, were held up to ridicule because supposedly their names mean “hornet” and “weasel.” The rabbis would do word plays on women being like that – like hornets and weasels.

The Greek world was little better. Wealthy Greek and Roman women had some more liberty and more authority. But as one Greek writer put it, “We keep paramours or mistresses for pleasure. We attend to prostitutes for our daily needs and we have wives to bear us legitimate children.”

Now, I underline all these things to give you a backdrop for how utterly revolutionary Jesus’ attitude was toward women. For example, Jesus redefined adultery in Mark 10. Applying the prohibition not only against women, but also against men and giving women the right to divorce their husbands for adultery. And Jesus limited divorce in contrast to the rabbis who said you could divorce your wife if she burned a meal and put her out on the street. Jesus said divorce only applied to a very limited situation of unfaithfulness and the breaking of one’s marriage vows.

What is really interesting in the ministry of Jesus is the way that he interacted with women. For example, unlike any rabbi of his day, Jesus had women among his disciples. If you are taking notes, you might want to jot down Luke 8:1-2.

Now, I think the most interesting story is the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10 where Martha is doing what would be expected of a woman who has invited a well-known

rabbi into her home. She is busy and bothered about many preparations. But her sister, Mary, is doing what is absolutely forbidden. She is sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him instruct her in the Torah. He is a rabbi. And in that culture when he spoke, everything he spoke was called Torah. He was giving people an understanding of what it meant to be God's people. Mary is sitting at his feet and she is not sitting there, as some people would like to put it, just adoring him with not a thought in her head. She is sitting at his feet, which would have been the position of a disciple, and she is learning Bible from him.

And so Jesus then challenges Mary's sister, Martha, saying, "You are anxious and distressed about many things, but only a few things are necessary. Indeed, only one and Mary has chosen the better part. It shall not be taken from her."

I put on the overhead a list for you of some of the things that we see in the ministry of Jesus.

****Overhead –**

- 1. The first news of the incarnation went to a woman. (Luke 1:32-35)**
- 2. The first miracle was performed for a woman. (Jn. 2:1-11)**
- 3. The first Samaritan convert was a woman. (Jn. 4:7-42)**
- 4. The first person clearly told by Jesus that he was the Messiah was a woman, a Samaritan woman. (Jn. 4:26)**
- 5. The first Gentile convert was a woman. (Matt. 15:21-28)**
- 6. The first resurrection teaching was given to a woman. (Jn. 11:23-27)**
- 7. The first to witness the resurrection was a woman. (Matt. 28:9)**

8. The first witnesses to the resurrection were women. (Matt. 28:10; Jn. 20:18)

Again, amazingly in contrast to the culture that said women could not bear witness. They weren't considered credible, Jesus reveals himself as risen first to women.

Dorothy Sayers, a Christian writer and dear friend to C.S. Lewis, summed up the attitude of Jesus toward women. Listen to this quote: "Perhaps it was no wonder that women were the last at the cross. They had never known a man like this Man. There never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made sick jokes about them...who rebuked without querulousness, and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There was no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything funny or inferior about women's nature."

While it is not often that I quote from Alan Alda, I really like his definition of a feminist. He says, "I am a feminist in so far as I believe that women are people." And that is what we could say about Jesus. He was a feminist in so far as he believed that women were people. Not lesser people. Not inferior people. Not dumb people. Not people to be made fun of. Just people.

And this attitude of Jesus affected his followers including the apostle Paul in a text that has often been called the Great Magna Carta, the announcement of liberty and freedom for women. We read in Galatians 3:28, "In Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor

free, male nor female, for you are all one.” All the old distinctions of the Jewish culture, the Greek and Roman cultures – ethnic distinctions, economic distinctions, gender distinctions – these things are overcome in term of limitation in Christ Jesus.

Marlene

If as Rich said, a feminist is someone who treats women as people, then I would be a feminist. I want to be treated like a person. I want to have the opportunity to use my gifts and to make a meaningful contribution for the Lord. I don’t want to be restricted and limited just because I’m a woman. But I have a problem being called a feminist because there is more to it than just treating women like people. There is a lot of other baggage that comes along with modern feminism that makes it impossible for me as a Christian woman to go along. And it’s because of all of these other that we are even talking about it with you today.

Although I shy away from calling myself a feminist, I am wholeheartedly committed to a woman’s freedom and woman’s right to use her gifts and do what God calls her to do. After all, the parable of the talents in Mt. 25, (where Jesus warns us not to waste the gifts and abilities that God has given us because we will one day be called upon to give an account for what we have done with our lives) applies to me as a woman just as much as it does a man.

But I believe that feminism has gone off course and embraced ideas and agendas that any committed follower of Jesus just could not go along with. Here are a few of the reasons why I can’t be a feminist and why I think Jesus, who loves women, would confront feminists:

WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE WORLD IS MEN

Since the 60's, feminists have been arguing that the problem with the world is a thing called patriarchy—the idea that our society is dominated by men and that they oppress women into subordinate roles. You know, men run everything; the government, the economy, all the businesses, and the women stay home to bake the pies and have babies. Feminists say that men's control over society (and ultimately over women) is perpetuated by the myth that men are more aggressive and should lead and that women are somehow weaker and should follow. Women are unfairly and unjustly kept in subordinate roles against their wills because men are and always have been in control.

And it's clear that with men at the helm, the world is a mess! The feminist solution is to eliminate patriarchy—replace men with women, give women an equal place in society and let them run the show for a while. It would be fairer to women and we would see change and vast improvements. I'm convinced if some feminists had their way, they would just do away with men all together. Who needs them, they say? We can get along just fine without them, except of course for the occasional sperm donation so that the species can go on.

The result of 30 years of this message is that today, it's OK for women to hate men just because they are men. In fact, it's fashionable to male-bash, to say that men are jerks and to criticize anything that's male-related, like football or hunting or to criticize distinctively male characteristics like decisive leadership, ambition or competitiveness. I've noticed this trend on TV for years—male-bashing is perfectly acceptable but you hardly ever see anyone on TV bash a female. There's even a show now, I've not seen it, that's called Men Behaving Badly. That's what we need, another show that portrays men as stupid jerks.

Well as a Christian, I just can't endorse any of these notions. First of all, like it or not, sin is an equal opportunity employer and I have yet to meet a woman who is pure, innocent and clean as the driven snow. Let's be honest, when it comes to sin, women are no better than men and in some areas, they're much worse. I'm a woman. I've been in high school. I went to college. I know what girls are capable of doing. I know how devious and catty and two-faced they can be to each other. Girls may not use fists, but their tongues can be pretty lethal.

Not only that, but I'm married to a man and I have been for almost 25 years, and I love him and I love him being a man. I'm glad he's not like me, that we are different—I love the fact that he's confident and strong and willing to take the lead. I love the fact that he loves me and I believe he would, as Paul instructs husbands, lay down his life for me. I don't even like to think about what I'd do without him. Perhaps this is why God said it was not good for us to be alone. Men and women need each other. I know I need Rich!

FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

In recent years there has been a rising interest in paganism and wiccan witchcraft and this type of spirituality has infiltrated feminism. It's appealing to feminists because of the emphasis on goddess worship and mother earth. With Christianity there is God (masculine) but with wiccan witchcraft, there is Goddess (feminine). They believe that there were these ancient cultic religions that pre-date Christianity, that worshipped goddesses and where women dominated society rather than men. Perhaps you've heard of the Lilith-fairs—feminist rock concerts with performers like Sarah McLoughlin, Jewel, and Alanis Morissette or religious meetings about Sophia—the female personification of wisdom. Once again, to

the very legitimate cause of treating women like people, feminist have added something else—feminist spirituality.

Jesus would conflict with this wiccan witchcraft and this feminist spirituality because it is counterfeit and false and ultimately demonic. There are no goddesses—there is only one God, who alone is Creator—everything else is a false god. He alone has spoken to us and revealed Himself through His word, the bible and through His Son, Jesus. Although God chooses to refer to Himself in male terms such as Father and King and Lord, from a study of the bible, it's apparent that God is not male in the sense that He has a gender like we do. In fact, according to Genesis, both male and female human beings were made in His image. God embraces both masculine and feminine characteristics and then some. And even though God chose to come to earth as the man Jesus of Nazareth, this should not be a deterrent to women. You just heard Rich share about how Jesus related to women in His day and their response to Him. Apparently, they had never met a man like Jesus, or why else were they so devoted to Him—being the last at the cross and the first at the grave? I find in Jesus a God who loves me as a woman and who affirms me as a woman. He understands my needs and concerns as a woman and finds value in the things that I do as a woman. After all, me being a woman was God's idea in the first place. He designed and created me as a woman—He must like them.

ELIMINATION OF GENDER DIFFERENCES

Probably the thing that upsets me most about this additional feminist agenda, however, is the insistence that for women to be happy, to be fulfilled and to live truly meaningful lives, they must become like men. You see, feminists are committed to the elimination of all

gender distinctions in society because they believe these distinctions are holding women back and hindering their chances at true equality (for example, the notion that men are more aggressive and decisive and so are often the leaders of organizations while women are more relational and people-oriented so find themselves in service-type jobs). Any apparent differences between the sexes are the result of socialization or training by the culture around them to either “think like men” or “think like women.” BUT THERE IS NOTHING INNATE OR INBORN OR NATURAL ABOUT GENDER DIFFERENCES.

Gloria Steinham, well-known feminist spokesperson, has been telling women for years that “we must become the husbands we used to marry.” Women must reject stereotypical, traditional roles such as wife, homemaker and mother, and pursue full-time careers with the same drive and ambition as any man would.

Betty Freidan, feminist author who wrote the book “The Feminine Mystique” called the home a “comfortable concentration camp” and its prisoners were housewives who have been brainwashed and who are not fully human. “No woman should be authorized to stay home and raise her children. Women should not have that choice precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one.”

Kate Millet, feminist author who was praised by Cosmopolitan Magazine as the silver-tongued spokesman for the feminist movement, advocated the institutionalization of childcare for all children. In her mind, institutionalized childcare would not only improve the care of the young, it would also further undermine the family, which would contribute to the freedom of women.

Feminists believed that for this change to be effective for women, little girls would need to be re-educated so that they wouldn't grow up wanting to be wives, homemakers or mothers. And so we've seen a full-scale attempt to influence an entire generation into conformity with these feminist ideas. Back in the 80's I used to watch Sesame St. with my kids when they were small and that show rarely if ever showed a mother as a viable role model for little girls. They did of course have women doctors and judges and police officers. On the cover of my son's 5th grade social studies textbook were pictures of men and women in all kinds of professions. There was not one picture of a woman with a child. But there were pictures of a woman astronaut, scientist and construction worker. In 1990, when then first lady Barbara Bush was invited to give the commencement address at Wellesley College, hundreds of feminist students protested arguing that Mrs. Bush was not a suitable role model for girls because she spent her life raising children rather than pursuing a career.

It's this message that women need to become more like men that makes feminists such fierce supporters of abortion (which is another reason why I can't be a feminist). It is not because they care about women's health or that they even want to make sure every child is a wanted child. But in order for them to reach complete equality with men, they have to somehow change their anatomy and escape their biology. Women must become wombless and unpregnant and abortion on demand enables them to do just that. Support for abortion on demand has become the feminist litmus paper test for political candidates. And this explains why feminists are able to support politicians who in other ways abuse and take advantage of women—just as long as they support abortion.

But most women were not ready to completely abandon marriage and motherhood for career, so feminists began to tell women they could have it all. They could be married, raise children and have a career. It'll just take a little finagling. It'll take convincing women that leaving a 6 week old infant to return to the office is the most normal, natural thing in the world. Glamour magazine warned its readers in an issue several years ago not to wait too long to return to work once the baby is born. "Babies are hard to resist once they're at this stage, and mothers can sometimes find it difficult to 'break-away' if they delay too long." It'll take coming up with terms like "quality time." Mothers used to just spend time with their kids. Now we have to call it quality time, because it sure isn't quantity. It'll take learning how to live with guilt and cope with stress. Golda Meir of Israel confessed she has nagging doubts about the price her children have paid for her career, adding, "You can get used to anything if you have to, even feeling perpetually guilty." But it's hard to have it all—most people can't do it. Actress Katherine Hepburn said in an interview, "I'm not sure any woman can successfully pursue a career and be a mother at the same time. The trouble with women today is that they want everything. But no one can have it all." Another actress and mother, Joanne Woodward (wife of actor Paul Newman) agreed and said that both her career and her children have suffered. "I've been torn and haven't been able to function fully in either arena. I don't know one person who does both successfully, and I know a lot of working mothers."

The thing that strikes me about feminists is just how anti-woman they are. I know they believe they are pro-women and helping to advance the cause of women's equality and set women free, but they have nothing positive to say about a "woman's world" because the only things that really matter to them are found in a "man's world."

Well again, as a Christian, I just cannot agree with the feminist agenda. First of all, I'm completely opposed to the destruction of innocent human life through abortion and the selfishness and greed that motivates this atrocity.

Over the past several years, experts have been coming up with mountains of evidence of the innate, inborn differences between men and women—differences not just in their physical bodies, but in their unique desires, ambitions and ways of looking at life. The bestseller *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* by marriage counselor John Gray suggests that men and women are so completely different; it's like they came from two different planets.

I believe the denial of these differences has been harmful to women. It's produced a lot of unhappiness and frustration. It's like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole—it's just not a natural fit. But women still bought the message that they don't need men, that men can wait but careers can't and pretty soon their biological clocks were ticking and they were wondering what went wrong.

There's a wonderful sounding book that was just reviewed last Thursday on the Editorial page of the Dispatch about this whole subject. It's called, *WHAT OUR MOTHERS DIDN'T TELL US: WHY HAPPINESS ELUDES THE MODERN WOMAN* by Danielle Crittenden.

I'd like to finish up by saying that I could not be a feminist because of their low view of mothers.

It's important, though, for everyone to understand that nowhere in the bible does it suggest that the only meaningful, fulfilling thing for a woman to do with her life is get married and have kids. In fact, the bible says the exact opposite. In 1 Cor. 6 Paul exhorts both single men and women that it is good for them to remain unmarried because the unmarried are free to be concerned about the affairs of the Lord and how to please Him. Jesus in Mt.19 also commends those who remain unmarried for the kingdom, saying elsewhere that once we get to heaven, there will not be any marriage. And our two greatest examples, Paul and Jesus were both unmarried.

But the bible does see mothers as important. The fifth commandment, right after the first four about our relationship and responsibilities to God, is about honoring our fathers and mothers—which is before the commandments about murder, lying adultery and stealing. It seems obvious to me that from God's perspective, parenting is important, and mothers and fathers deserve respect and esteem because what they do as parents has tremendous value. Proverbs tells us that a good wife and mother is worth more than fine jewels. In the New Testament, Christian women are exhorted to invest time and energy in their homes and to the care of their children. At the same time, scripture strongly rebukes mothers who neglect their children—who as Ezekiel said, “sacrifice them to idols.” This is what feminists have been telling women to do—sacrifice your children to the idol of career—financial success, prestige and self-esteem.

I realize there are women today, especially single moms, who would love to stay home with their kids but have no choice but to work to provide for them. Let me say something about this—I believe we have feminists to thank for this predicament as well. Because of feminists insisting that men and women are entirely the same and deserve the same (equal) treatment under the law, divorce laws were changed and this has backfired on women. Now after a divorce, women are rarely awarded alimony and instead are forced to go to work, just like a man, even though they still may have pre-school age children at home.

Let me talk frankly here—I have to confess that it wasn't the bible that convinced me that being a mother was so important. I was convinced as a social work major in college, sitting in classes on human development, that one of the most important jobs in the world was being a mother. The evidence in study after study convinced me that what a developing baby needs the most is a full-time mother. And those first 3-5 years of life are the most crucial. Yes, it can seem monotonous, changing diapers, wiping dirty faces, picking up toys. Yes, you can't always see immediate results for what you do. But you only have a few short years with your children to build into them a secure foundation from which they can then go out into the world confident that they are loved. And no one else will love your child the way you do. No one else cares as much as you do, and that's the way it should be—that is how God intends for it to be. It doesn't take a village to raise a child; it takes a family, a mother and a father.

I am thankful that I had the opportunity to stay home with my two children when they were small, but honestly, I wouldn't have had it any other way. No amount of money would have

made me leave them in the hands of someone else. You know, we need to put this into perspective. The average woman will live about 80 years. About forty of those years can be spent employed at a job. MOST WOMEN SPEND ONLY ABOUT 8-10 YEARS BEING FULL-TIME MOTHERS. That's a small part of your life in exchange for the joy and satisfaction of knowing you did the best you could with the most important job you will ever have.

Rich

Now, I want to turn with you to what may be the most controversial text regarding women's roles in the church in the entire New Testament and that is 1 Timothy 2:9-15. Before we look at the text's possible meaning, let me suggest to you that I know of no text in the New Testament that has been more variously interpreted than 1 Timothy 2:9-15. There are many people out there who say that they are certain that they have the obvious meaning and that they know the obvious intention of the apostle Paul. I have a file of 11 very different interpretations of 1 Timothy 2. I know of no text in the New Testament that is more problematical and that has given rise to greater shotgun approaches than 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

Part of the problem we have, before we even get to the interpretative work is that there is no agreement regarding the appropriate translation of certain words. For example, in v. 12 it says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man." That little phrase "have authority" is a possible translation of the Greek word "authentein". This word is used nowhere else in the New Testament. To be dogmatic about its meaning is impossible because we don't see it anywhere else. Some people say that it refers to any exercise of authority or leadership over a man in the church. Other people citing numerous

Greek works outside the New Testament say the word *authentein* means to domineer or usurp authority.

Then we come to the word “silent.” It says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be silent.” There is debate about the meaning of that word. Some people say that a woman should be absolutely silent in the church, that she is to have no vocalization whatsoever other than, perhaps, to sing – but she shouldn’t pray out loud or share a testimony or do anything that would break silence. Others say the word doesn’t even mean silent. It means quiet spirit.

And no one knows what v. 15 is talking about. Here the NIV says, “But women will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety.” You talk about a problematical verse. Some translations put it, “But women will be saved through the birth of the child [not childbearing] but the birth of THE child” – meaning that women will be saved through the birth of the Christ Child.

Some people say the back drop of Jewish myth is that women were particularly susceptible to demonic attacks and Paul is giving a word of assurance to Christian women that they would be protected from demonic attack in childbirth. Other people say that women will be saved so long as they adopt the role appropriate to them.

The short of it is that not only do we have a range of interpretations that I will get to in a moment, but also there is no common agreement on even what the Greek means. All we would have to do is do some of the reading that I have done and you would see this scatter shot of enormous amounts of confusion ranging over this text. And do not say to yourself that the only reason there is this confusion is because we don’t want to take Paul literally, but it is some sort of feminist conspiracy. The truth is that there is legitimate difference

regarding what the backdrop was for this text and legitimate disagreement over the meaning of the words.

Indeed, I would suggest that the problem we have with 1 Timothy 2:9-15 is not a problem of our feminized culture and this literal restriction on the roles of women. The problem is not between us and them. But the problem is really between them and them. That is the entire New Testament seems to open up doors and opportunities for women to function. Women are given the gift of the Spirit and are prophesying. Women are co-laboring along side of Paul. Women are instructing men as Priscilla instructed the teacher Apollos in Acts 18. And in several debated texts, women appeared to be functioning in church government – Phoebe in Romans 16:1 appears to be a deaconess, although only in her particular case is the word translated “servant.” And in a heartily debated text Romans 16:7, a woman named Junia, who only after the 13th Century was turned into a man named Junius is said to be outstanding among the apostles.

So, we have a flow or a direction of New Testament teaching and the attitude of Jesus and then we have this one text that seems to form some restrictions. We have these translations problems. And in addition an enormous range of interpretations. Virtually every verse and every word is fought over. Let me give you the range of interpretations briefly.

First of all, we have the most conservative perspective that no woman may teach or lead any male above age 10 in anyway. Some churches say that they can’t have a woman teach a Sunday School class where there are teenage boys or men present in the class. Some churches say that women cannot be ordained or exercise leadership over any male in the church who is a teenager or an adult. There is an absolutist position. And they would base

it on 1 Timothy 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over men, but she must be silent.”

Now, these churches like to pride themselves on the literal reading, what they might call a common sense reading of the text. And they would suggest that any kind of compromise or soft-pedaling of a woman’s restricted role is simply accommodation with the feminist spirit of the age. It is simply a refusal to face up to feminism as it has been announced in its secular forms. But I honestly believe that that is an unjust charge. And even among those who have an absolutist position regarding women’s roles in ministry one can find grave inconsistencies in the practice of the church. For example, many churches that say a woman is not allowed to teach men allow women to teach men when they are on the mission field. If there is a universal prohibition that Paul is announcing, why would a woman be allowed to be a missionary teaching and instructing men in other nations in doctrine and the gospel, but not allowed to do that here.

And 1 Timothy 2:9 and 10 are not taken nearly so literally as 1 Timothy 2:12. Many women wear gold and pearls to church. Why is that permitted if that teaching isn’t culturally relevant, that is applicable to the culture of Paul’s day, but perhaps not applicable in the same way to our situation today? If Paul is giving universal commands that must be obeyed in every church in every time and in every setting, then why is it that those with a so-called absolutist position would permit women to come to church wearing gold or pearls. And why not go the whole route and say that even the 1 Cor. 11 command to wear a veil must be applied to women today in the modern evangelical church? What is the particular hermeneutic, that is what is the particular interpretative device that the absolutist uses to say that only this verse is universally applicable, but this other verse is simply cultural and can be dispensed with?

Now, some churches take what I call the middle position. They say that women are allowed to speak. They don't have to be absolutely silent in front of men in church. But what Paul is referring to in 1 Timothy 2:12 is authoritative teaching. So they read v. 12 this way, "I do not permit a woman to authoritatively teach a man, she must be silent regarding the teaching of doctrine or the offering of direction." These churches would permit a woman to speak from the front, but they don't call it teaching they call it sharing. Sister So-and-So is going to share with us.

Now, obviously, this opens up all kinds of contradictory and inconsistent practices, especially when Sister So and So is not just sharing a testimony, but is actually opening the bible and very often in churches that have this middle position, they allow women missionaries to come in off the field and teach. But they call it sharing. Or they might call it an inspirational message.

And then there are the whole range of opinions that suggest that 1 Timothy 2:9-15 is not meant to be a universal prohibition against all women teaching or exercising authority over all men in all cultures for all time. And there is a whole range of opinion regarding why people read 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in a more open, culturally relative way. Some folks claim to have found evidence that there was a feminist cult operative in Ephesus, a cult that women were drawn to that involved the worship of Goddesses. And that Paul was specifically attempting to stamp out that feminist cult teaching that many women in the church had given themselves to. And so he is saying in this instant "I don't want women to teach or to exercise authority over a man." Opinion ranges about how sound the evidence is for the existence of that feminist cult. Wayne Grudem, for example, suggests that we don't have external evidence in that regard.

Other people say that because of the social position of women in the Jewish and Greek world, women were not permitted to teach or to exercise authority because they were unlearned or because they had never really had the opportunity to learn the scriptures so that they could teach them. And what Paul was doing was not prohibiting something so much as permitting women to learn. So v. 11 for them is the key, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission” and until she learns she should not presume to be a teacher. Now, I think this view has some merit. Because indeed as we learned at the front end of this talk, rabbis considered it a sin to teach Torah, the law, to women. So rather than being a restrictive perspective, Paul is actually opening the door for women to learn.

The best perspective that I think takes account of the most evidence in 1 Timothy is the one offered by Gordon Fee. Gordon Fee says that when you read 1 and 2 Timothy as a whole, what you will find is that they were written to combat false teaching. For example in 1 Timothy 1:3, we read, “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.”

1 and 2 Timothy were written to direct Timothy to stamp out false teaching. Apparently, false teachers had worked their way into the church. Not only had they worked their way into the church, but apparently there were women in the church who were listening to this false teaching and who were being communicators of it broadly. And so we see in 2 Timothy 3:6-8 “They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women who are loaded down with sin and who are swayed by all kinds of evil desires always learning, but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.”

These false teachers wormed their way into the homes of women and then the women in the Ephesian church became the carriers of this false teaching. And Paul says that in 1 Timothy 5:13 – he is talking about the younger widows who “get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.” Now, the word “gossip” is a poor translation. Nowhere do we find a shred of evidence that this word should be translated “gossip.” The word means to talk foolishness and it is mainly used in philosophical texts in the ancient Greek world. It means to communicate false teaching. Paul was talking about women who were going from house to house carrying false teaching with them. And we can see that is what Paul was talking about in v. 15 of 1 Timothy 5 when he says, “Some have, in fact, already turned away to follow Satan.”

And so it is with that as a back drop – false teachers spreading false teaching through women in the church that the apostle Paul puts this prohibition on women in the church saying, “I don’t want you to teach, but instead to submit”. And then he uses the illustration of Adam and Eve, not in terms of, I believe, some universal creation ordinance, hence another Old Testament context – the first born are not to have been the priority. Jacob, for example, is given priority over Esau. And Isaac over Ishmael and David over his brothers. I don’t think Paul’s concern was who was formed first and who was formed second, but the fact that the one who was formed second was deceived. But Adam was not the one who was deceived. It was the woman who was deceived and who became a sinner. And he is saying just as Eve became the one through whom false teaching spread, so women in the Ephesian church are the vehicle through whom false teaching spread. Thus as Eve became the open door to Satan, women in the Ephesian church became the open door to Satan and must be silenced.

Let me bring all of this home. #1 – I would say there is legitimate debate in the church world regarding the true meaning of 1 Timothy 2:9-15, both the translation of the text and also its interpretation.

#2 – The entire New Testament seems to be tilted toward giving women opportunity consistent with their gifting and calling before God. If you read 1 Timothy 2 as a restriction universally on women, then it stands alone. I choose to read it congruent with the rest of the New Testament.

#3 – To read 1 Timothy 2:9-15 as a cultural prohibition, not universally applicable in all times and in all places, does not open the door to calling every command into question e.g. for the recognition of homosexuals. What we are not saying that every time the culture changes we are just going to accept something new despite what the Bible says. Listen, friends, there is a bright line of distinction between the moral prohibitions of the Bible and those who have to do with our social relationships. When the Bible calls something sin, it is sin always in every place. Homosexuality, adultery and pre-marital sex are always called sins. And it doesn't matter how the culture shifts, the practice of sex outside of heterosexual marriage is always disapproved of.

On the other hand, while the instances of women leading are admittedly rare in the Old Testament and New Testament context, nevertheless, we find clear instances of women leading with God's approval. Deborah led Israel as a judge. There is no doubt that Priscilla was a leader in the church. Hulda, a prophetess, led the people of Israel. These things are never called sin. I don't believe we get on a slippery slope when we say that certain commands in the New Testament are not universally applicable, but may be culturally relative. The truth is everyone reads the New Testament that way, otherwise we men would be greeting each other with kisses, as Paul commands in four separate places in Romans 16,

1 Cor. 16, 2 Cor. 13, in 1 Thess. 5. And Peter commands it in 1 Peter 5. We all draw lines culturally regarding social relations; otherwise we would require women to never cut their hair or to wear veils.

Here is what I believe is the controlling principle behind 1 Timothy 2 as well as many other commands about social relations in the New Testament. I believe that the controlling principle in the mind of the apostle Paul is the promotion of the gospel. For Paul he regularly called upon people to limit their freedom in order to not hinder someone else from accepting the gospel. For the apostle Paul there were lots of things that might be permitted, but if it didn't promote the acceptance of the gospel, Paul would tell people to not do it. The gospel and only the gospel was the supreme value in the mind of Paul. So, for example, he tells women in Titus 2 to be domestic, to take on certain roles. Why? So that the word of God will not be maligned. So that people will think much of the gospel.

He tells slaves to obey their masters in 1 Tit 2:9. Why? To make the teaching about God our savior attractive.

He tells people in 1 Cor. 10 to not eat meat offered to idols so that they don't put a stumbling block in some one else's way regarding the reception of the gospel.

He tells people to give up the right to sue each other, to lose money, even when you have a legitimate lawsuit so that they won't bring any shame to the gospel.

It was the promotion of the gospel that I believe underlines this particular text in 1 Timothy. If the gospel was being hindered, then Paul had no problem saying, "Women, I want you to take on this role and not that."

But Paul could be exceptionally flexible and here is my last point. Paul could be exceptionally flexible in different cultural settings regarding people's social relationships if the gospel wasn't being hindered in any way. So Paul had co-workers who were women and

let women teach men in different instances and has women who are of great value to him in the service of the gospel and in spreading the gospel among men and who are leading apparently in house churches.

To sum up –here is what I believe the New Testament message is concerning women in roles of leadership in the church. I believe that the New Testament says to women, “Your role in the church is dependent upon the culture you live in and whether a broad exercise of leadership and teaching would hinder the gospel.” I don’t believe that the apostle Paul lays out a one-size fits all rule. Because of the gospel, I believe Paul would permit enormous liberty and enormous freedom to women on a college campus in the US in the 1990’s in an urban area. He would say, I believe, that it would hinder the gospel to restrict a woman from any role, that you are throwing a stumbling block in the way of the gospel. That social relations are merely cultural clothing and these things can change, but the gospel never changes.

On the other hand, if a woman exercises great liberty in a village in India or in the Arab world where the liberating message of Christianity has not penetrated and done its work for generations, that would be a great stumbling block and so for the sake of the gospel, Paul would say, if you are working in India or are in an Arab culture, you restrict your liberty for the sake of the gospel. So our dear friend, Kathy Saperstein, allowed herself to be veiled from head to toe when she was a missionary in Pakistan. Did she have the permission to wear jeans and a t-shirt as she did in the US? Yes. Would it have been beneficial for the gospel? No. So, she took on a restricted role so that Jesus would be promoted.

And these things take great gifts of discernment. It is far easier to have a one-size fits all approach. But the New Testament in a variety of areas does not give us that kind of absolute clarity and it doesn’t because it has the overriding concern of the gospel. What is

appropriate at a university setting, may not be appropriate in rural America. What is appropriate among 20-year olds may not work with 70-year olds. In a time of great transition in culture, we need great discernment to work these things out in practice.

But here is our bottom line in the Vineyard. We see a drift, a tenor, in the New Testament of great respect and dignity given to women by Jesus and by the other New Testament writers. In total contrast to the prevailing cultural attitudes of the day – Jesus and the apostle Paul never makes fun of, never treats an inferior, never condescends to, never says that the gifts of women are less than men or that women are less competent than men. There is this great liberty given to women, a liberty given in the Holy Spirit. Our bottom line here in the Vineyard is that we believe that women are equally gifted and that there is no New Testament prohibition against a woman being called to any role in the church whatsoever. But, for the sake of the gospel, in certain settings, in certain places, at certain times, a woman might voluntarily limit her freedom because she loves Jesus more than she loves her rights. And in so doing, she follows the path of Jesus who laid down his life in order to save the world.

Let's pray.