

Titus 2

Church Ministry for Women

We are going to focus on Titus 2:3-5 this morning (and also look at a number of other passages relating to this topic) but it's worth reading the whole of Titus 2 to see the context and, especially, the reasons Paul gives in this letter why Christians are to behave in particular ways.

To help us think about that it's worth remembering one of the key lessons that Tess teaches her husband in the classic heist movie Ocean's Eleven. If you haven't seen it the film is about a robbery in a casino with amazing security devices. But at the end the nasty casino owner gets his comeuppance when he uses his wife as a bargaining chip to get his stolen money back. The only problem is that his wife is watching him on one of the casino's hundreds of security cameras. As she says to her husband: "You of all people should know that in your casinos somebody is always watching."

That is exactly what Paul wants to emphasise to the Christians on Crete – they need to know that somebody is always watching and that, the message of the gospel that these Christians say they believe in needs to be lived out in order to be believable.

So as a young leader in the church Titus is not simply to give people doctrinal instruction in the great truths of the faith – the person of Christ, the sovereignty of God, the power and work of the Holy Spirit, though he certainly should do all those things. But he also needs to teach a way of life that accords with, that matches up with, sound or healthy doctrine and, according to v7, Titus is to set an example in living out this kind of life.

And he is to teach all the different groups of people in the church to do the same: other young men, older men, older women, younger women and slaves who, of course, might also be in any of the other 4 categories.

These Christians were to live, Paul says, in a way that took into account the fact that someone is always watching.

Three times he gives reasons for his instructions to Titus and the congregations he worked with on Crete which are to do with what outsiders will think about the life of the Christians in the churches:

v5 so that no-one will malign the word of God

v8 that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us

v10 so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive

Now there is a potential issue with this that I might as well deal with now before we go any further.

Because as soon as you point out to people that the reasons Paul gives for particular behaviours are to do with winning the acceptance of the outsider people say something like: "well in that case surely what Christians ought to demonstrate in their church practice with regard to men and women's ministry is a radical equality where both men and women can exercise any role in the church because that's the thing that will commend Christianity to the average non-Christian in our culture."

Do you see how the argument works: "if this is about commending the gospel to the culture surely, therefore, we should be practicing that which is acceptable to the culture – ministry with no gender distinctions."

I think, however, that there is a major flaw in that argument.

Imagine with me that you lived in a society where drunkenness was considered more of a virtue than a vice. Where sitting around getting smashed was a perfectly acceptable way to spend your time and where great drinkers were almost treated as heroes.

A society, in fact, almost exactly like the one we do live in!

And a society very similar to the one that Paul was living in. In the first century Roman world sexual athleticism and drinking stamina were highly prized. It was a culture where in some circles homosexuality was considered morally superior and where unparalleled wealth meant that greed was good.

Would we as Christians say that because sobriety would in no way be attractive to that culture, but rather appear to it to be narrow and repressive, that Christians should actively abandon their commitment to moderate drinking and join in with the best of them on a Friday or Saturday night out?

I don't think we would! You see Paul is NOT trying to commend Christianity to the people of the Roman world by conforming it to their expectations of what was and wasn't morally good.

He is trying to commend Christianity to the people of the Roman world by encouraging Christians to live in a way which is good in the eyes of God. And that means that we are no more at liberty to say that we can remove the command to a young Christian woman to be submissive to her husband from the Bible than we can remove the command to an older Christian man to be dignified.

Paul is not trying to get Christians to fit in with that culture or any other to make the gospel attractive. He is trying to get them to live in ways that will always be striking and commend the gospel to any culture because they are God's ways.

And, if you think about it for a minute, Paul's approach is the one that we know works. Because the people around us aren't actually impressed if we behave like them; even if they think the ways they behave are morally perfectly permissible and OK.

Way back in the ancient past when I was a Relay worker and Kath Knapman was just a little undergraduate we had a college rep, a hall-group leader, at one of the CU groups in Lancaster University. And whenever her boyfriend who was studying elsewhere, came to stay, they shared a bed. No doubt lots of us have done that and come to realise, one way or another, that it's a bad idea!

Anyway the point of the story is that, somehow, whether because this girl told them herself or someone else did, everybody in the halls knew about this. And, when it came to mission week, we had real difficulty getting anybody in those halls to come to any of the events that we put on.

Now that wasn't because the people in those halls were all upright and virginal. They were, as far as I know, as sexually immoral as most other students (which is very!). And they were quite happy to behave like that. But what they were not prepared to tolerate that kind of behaviour from Christians.

Paul is not trying to get Christians to fit in with that culture or any other to make the gospel attractive. He is trying to get them to live in ways that will always be striking and commend the gospel to any culture because they are God's ways.

That means we can't simply dismiss any of the things Paul commands for Christians in these verses as adornments of the gospel as merely relevant to a particular culture, because what Paul is commanding was radically countercultural then, just as it is now.

Well I hope I've convinced you that one of the reasons the NT commands a particular pattern for the ministry of men and women in the church is because the world is watching. Not because Paul wants the Christians to be like the world – but because he wants them to show the world that there is a better way to live.

So what is this better way? What will a ministry for women that adorns the gospel and so commends the gospel to the world actually look like?

Well it partly depends who you are – whether you are an older or a younger woman. Now I am intensely aware talking to a woman about her age is treading on thin ice. Talking to an entirely room full of women about their age is more like taking a bulldozer onto thin ice.

So I hope you won't think I'm just trying to avoid any controversy (as if we didn't have enough already!) by saying that I think "older" and "younger" are relative terms. You aren't necessarily an "older" woman at 30 or 40 or 50.

It seems to me that when the transition occurs depends on two things. One is about the broader culture. In the first century when 50 years would have been quite a long life and people got married at about age 15 you would definitely be an older woman at 30! In our culture where 80 years is a good life span and people tend to get married in their mid 20s you are probably still a younger woman at 30.

The other factor in the transition is to do with the people around you. To put it bluntly if you are 30 or over at Christ Church Liverpool or Aigburth Community Church you are definitely an older woman – because most of the women will be younger than you. In the end the, I think each of you is probably capable of deciding which category you fall into!

So what are these different groups of ladies actually meant to be doing? Well let's look at the older women first...

V3-4a. If the danger for old men is that they will complain about everything it seems that the danger for older women is that they will complain about everybody. They are to be reverent, Paul says, and not

slanderers. It's incredibly easy to pass judgment on the actions and attitudes of others. And it becomes easier and easier to do the older you get – because you have experienced the situations yourself and can go “oh well of course I would have done this...” or “why is she so stupid? Obviously the way to deal with that situation is...” But Paul says older women are called upon to resist those temptations. They are to exercise restraint, self-control, in the area of what they say about who.

So what does that look like in practice? Well it doesn't mean that you can't say anything about anybody else. So, to take what may be a relevant example for some, you look at the way someone else is bringing up or, perhaps in your view, failing to bring up, their children. What does it mean not to be a slanderer there? Well it seems to me that it's fine to chat through, with your husband or a friend, what maybe that other person needs to do. **As long as** you don't say anything untrue, unkind or unhelpful and think about how you would want to be spoken about yourself. This is not denying you the right to talk about other people in their absence. It is about really asking yourself why you are doing that. Because the sad truth is that most women who engage in such behaviour do so to allow themselves to feel superior to those they gossip about. And feeling superior has no place in the Christian life.

Older women are also to avoid being “slaves to much wine”. No doubt in his mind the commands are related – alcohol fuels much cruel gossip doesn't it?

But it's also a command that stands alone. In our society because most of the visible problems caused by alcohol – street brawling, stabbings, falls and people passing out and vomiting in the street – are associated with younger people out of a night-time we can think that this isn't an issue older people need to be told about. But that's not true. In fact most people, men and women, with serious alcohol problems are in their 30s and older. People who use alcohol as an escape from the pressures of work, family life or to fill what feels like a hole in their sense of purpose.

Paul commands you not to go there. Much wine, he says, is a very hard task master. It makes you into nothing more than a slave. Why? Well for two reasons. Firstly it doesn't ever actually give you the thing you are looking for. Large quantities of alcohol can't make you less stressed at work or alleviate family pressures or give you a sense of purpose. Taking alcohol to help with work is like having an anaesthetic to help with cancer. It might numb the pain but it doesn't actually do anything to fight the disease.

And there is one more huge positive thing that older women are to do: “teach what is good”. Let's be quite clear – Paul believes in women teaching in the church. In particular he believes in older women teaching younger women. It's worth noting that the word Paul uses for teach here (sophronizosin) is not the same word for teach as in 1 Timothy 2:12. It's a word that has more overtones of advise or encourage: Paul wants to make a distinction between this teaching and the whole church teaching which is to be done by the male elders of the church.

It's a teaching that has a particular focus on training the younger women in a way of life that reflects God's good plan. These young women are to love their husbands and children (normal then to be married much younger and no pill!), self-controlled (may particularly have “chaste” in mind), pure, working at home (not as opposed to working somewhere else but as opposed to being at home and not doing anything! Proverbs 31!), kind and submissive to their own husbands.

Now these are not the only things that young women are to be trained in. Paul is not saying that “a woman's place is in the home” in the way that we might imagine at first sight. Paul certainly does think that home and family life is very important. And if we do not think that it is a bad reflection on us not on him!

But we need to remember Paul is not saying this is all young women should learn. He IS saying this is what older women will be particularly equipped to teach these younger women. To use an example from our church. I may be well equipped to teach the young women in our church the about the person of God as I'll be doing over the next three Sunday mornings. But, as an older woman, Kath Knapman is better equipped than I am to help younger women work out what our doctrine of God means for you not just as a human being and a Christian but as a woman. And it is that life lived out, Paul says, that will make the gospel attractive to others, both men and women. It will stop people from reviling, rejecting, the word of God – the message of the gospel.

It's at this point, I think, that the relative nature of older and younger really comes into its own. So an older woman, say someone who graduated last year, might be in a great position to teach a younger woman, say a first year student, what it looks like to deal with the pressure of exams in a godly way that adorns the gospel.

Or an older woman who has, say, been working in an office for five years and is now working at home full-time looking after young children might be a great person to teach a younger woman just started as a teacher how to reject advances from non-Christian men at work. Or how to deal with your non-Christian mum nagging you about having children.

For married women the older women are to model and teach the younger women to submit to their husbands. Now I know that's a bit off topic for today where we're thinking mostly about ministry in the church but it's worth mentioning in passing.

And I just want to say that this is not about agreeing with everything your husband does or being a doormat. It's about an attitude of the heart that seeks to bring blessing and recognise the leadership of a husband as head of the household.

Samuel 25:1-35. In this passage Abigail submits to her husband – she doesn't set out to undermine him. And she teaches a king – the king of Israel. Not by authoritatively declaring the Scriptures to him or by assuming a position of headship over men but by giving gentle, humble advice.

So the reason for this pattern of living is that it commends to the world things God says are good.

And there is to be a constant chain of communication and example between the older and younger women which will, as we have seen with Abigail, also profoundly bless the lives of the men with whom such women come into contact. Well that's the essential teaching of Titus 2. But it's worth us spending a few minutes too looking at some of the many other ministries that the New Testament envisages women exercising in the life of the church.

Prophetesses

The key passage here is 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. This is a fairly tricky passage all about head coverings which we won't go in to now!

But two things are very clear. The first very clear thing is that Paul envisages women praying and prophesying in church. In other words women will talk to God out loud in the church meeting and they will also speak messages that they have supernaturally received from God in the church meeting. Elsewhere the NT tells us that the content of such prophecies needs to be evaluated by the elders of the church to see if it is in

accordance with the Scriptures. So this is not teaching in the church because, if you like, there is no interpretation by the man or woman giving the prophecy – they simply speak what God has given them to say rather than the preacher/teacher who evaluates what they will teach from what the Scriptures say. Women should pray and prophesy in church.

The second thing that is really clear is that Paul doesn't think that women praying or prophesying in any way undermines the overall leadership and responsibility of men in the church. Because while they are prophesying or praying the women are to be dressed like women. They are to make it clear that they are under authority in the church.

Teaching

One of the things that is often said is that because some women have undoubtedly got public speaking gifts that is a sign that God wants them to be preachers and that it would be very wicked of anybody to restrict the use of a gift that God has given.

Can I just say that that is total nonsense. There are all sorts of times when we may have a genuine gift but when it is inappropriate to use it – in fact most of Paul's discussion of the gift of tongues in 1 Cor 12-14 is based on exactly the idea that you need to restrain your use of gifts to when it is appropriate.

Such a view has much more to do with a 21st century philosophy of self-fulfilment than anything the Bible says. If God says that there are appropriate places for women to teach (and, we've seen from Titus 2 that he does!) then it's great that some women have teaching gifts. But obviously they need to be used within the frame work of all the other things God says about women and teaching!

If you do feel like you have such gifts though here is a list of suggestions about ways in which you might use them...

Teaching other women – at a day like this, a women's convention, a women's study group etc.
Evangelising non-Christians.
Giving a specifically female perspective to a mixed congregation.
Writing Christian books.
Housegroup co-leading

Deacons

Steve has already spoken to this issues in the first part of our session so I'll not say more!

Other Ministries

The list of other ministries open to women in the church is more or less endless. Because the leadership of the church, which is where male headship is modelled, is exercised by the elders teaching the Scriptures.

So there are all sorts of others things, many of which involve the exercise of what we might loosely call leadership gifts – strategy, planning, presentation etc – that are perfectly open to women in the church...

Treasurer
Missions coordinator
Ministry Trainee
Women's work
Christ Church Tots and Kids
Catering
PA and technical support
Web site assistance
Groups looking at city centre ministry, church planting etc.
Child protection coordinator
Administrator

And those are things we already have! Imagine how many more we could have if we had the people with the passion and motivation (and the money!) to do them... Some of them could be done equally well by men or women, others perhaps especially well by women...

Student worker
International students worker
Children's and youth worker
Building manager (if we have a building)
People writing to MPs presenting a Christian perspective
Campaigning against abortion
Joining the city council
School governors
Poverty relief – campaigning, giving, volunteering
Anti-pornography campaigns
Working to help prostitutes escape exploitation
Prison ministry
Counselling
Drama
Music composition and performance
Hospital visiting
Welcome ministry and newcomers
Trustees of Christian charities

Missionary
UCCF staff worker

And I haven't even mentioned being a wife or a mother. That's a sensitive subject I know. Some here would love to be one or both of those things but aren't. And I know that's very hard. But isn't that a good sign that this is a valuable and worthwhile role. That it is not something to be looked down on, as I fear much of the world does, but a very precious thing. It's absolutely fine to want to be a wife or a mother. It's fine to be sad if you're not. As long as you trust God's provision for you in Christ and don't think he owes you that, because he doesn't. But it's fine to want it. Because it's a good thing!

And if you are a wife or mother don't let anybody tell you that giving your time to that is a waste. The idea that you have to go to paid work to be "useful" is a lie of our society which is driven by its obsession with economically measurable things as the only things that count. Paid work is great. If you're in it good for you. Serve God in it. But none of us should think it's the only thing.

Well I hope I'm leaving you inspired that actually God has for you, as a women, a greater choice and variety of ministries open to you in the church and in the world than you could fulfil in a thousand lifetimes. I hope I leave you feeling that at Christ Church we want you to do ministry. Word ministry, mercy ministry, hospitality ministry and loads more beside. And I hope you finish this session feeling that the pattern for men's and women's ministry that God has ordained in the Bible is one that enables both men and women to be liberated into the freedom of how we have been created to be – equal but different.

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