

Explore: Please God in Your Worship

February 22, 2013

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 10 focuses on 1 Timothy 2:1-15.*

The text for this week offers several complicated passages. It begins with encouragement to pray for everyone, including kings and authorities. This is not because kings and political leaders are any more deserving of prayer than anyone else. Rather, the context of 1 Timothy might tell us the “kings and all those in authority” are the ones who have opposed the Ephesian Christians (perhaps by persecuting them).

Praying for these leaders is an act of witness and love along the lines of Jesus’ instruction to “pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Similar to turning the other cheek, praying for the well-being of your opposition transforms the reigning hostility and presents an example of faithful living (“peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness”) that might even persuade them to embrace the truth of the gospel.

True testimony

This is emphasized further after the worship fragment included in verses 5-6: “the testimony given in its proper time” (v. 6). Testimony is more than simply a declaration. As discussed last week in 1 Timothy 1:3-17, testimony overflows from a life lived well in Christ, that is, a life of faithfulness. Even here, the truth about Jesus is not a list of talking points, but rather his entire life as lived. Being witnesses to the truth of the gospel does not require becoming a power broker; it only requires a life of faithfulness.

Before examining what 1 Timothy 2:8-15 might mean, let’s state what these verses cannot mean within their Pauline context. First, they cannot serve as

a blanket condemnation of women teaching in the church, since in other letters Paul has allowed women to pray publicly (1 Corinthians 11:5).

Women and ministry

Further, this text cannot ban women from the work of ministry, since Paul has honored women who have worked alongside him (for example, Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2-3). Finally, these verses cannot restrict women from any formal position of authority, since Paul has affirmed the work of female apostles (for example, Junia in Romans 16:7). Therefore, while this passage presents many challenges to the reader, the way forward is embracing its complexity instead of reading it in a wooden manner.

1 Timothy 2:8-10 includes instructions to men and women about how to worship well. Because each New Testament epistle responds to a specific situation, we must try to understand the context of the epistle. For instance, men are told to “lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing” (v. 8). This statement likely indicates Ephesian Christian men may have been praying with hostility toward their fellow Christians. Keep in mind women also were praying publicly, but they apparently were not in error since they are not corrected here in the epistle.

Modesty

The Ephesian women, it seems, had their own problems—modesty in dress. While much has been made of the specific details of modesty the letter describes, we must remember that what counts as decent is a function of a particular cultural context. Thus, braided hair, mentioned in verse 9, is not condemned in itself. What can be said, however, is that the immodest details listed are associated with an extravagant wealthy life, which may provide helpful insights for other portions of this text. Moreover, we must remember the opening thrust of the letter—that any correction of believers

(doctrinal, ethical or otherwise) is pursued out of self-giving love (1:5) rather than a puffed-up self-centeredness.

Much ink has been spilled over 1 Timothy 2:11-15, mainly because of its statement that “a woman should learn in quietness and full submission” (v. 11), a statement that seemingly contradicts other texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:5, and a very confusing admonition that “women will be saved through childbearing” (v. 15). Once again, we must keep the cultural context in mind when interpreting this passage.

False teachers

Earlier in the epistle, warnings against false teaching were issued. This false teaching, in all likelihood, is related to the instructions about worship given in this passage. One possible scenario for understanding this text is as follows: the wealthy Ephesian women—that is, those who have been corrected for dressing immodestly—are spreading false teaching among the churches in the area. Timothy, charged with overseeing these churches, is instructed to curtail the erroneous doctrine from these deceptive women—who are compared to Eve tricking Adam—by ordering all women to be silent, at least until the error has been halted.

Part of this false teaching would even involve encouraging women to shun avoid marriage (1 Timothy 4:3). Thus, female false teachers are the focus of the prohibition, rather than all women in all places for all time. Along these lines, the discussion of Adam and Eve would be a response to the content of the erroneous doctrine, intended to correct their understanding of Genesis, not to create a one-size-fits-all paradigm.

Appropriate worship

Even if one does not find this interpretation compelling, it is important to read this text and all its confusing aspects in light of the entire biblical witness regarding gender and church order. Recall the gender equality

displayed in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In this light, it seems the least we can say about this text is that men and women should worship in an appropriate manner and learn together in faith and love.