

the principle of history. That is, God always spoke his word in particular historical and cultural settings, specially of the ancient Near East (the Old Testament), Palestinian Judaism (the Gospels) and the Graeco-Roman world (the rest of the New Testament). No word of God was spoken in a cultural vacuum; every word was spoken in a cultural context. It is, in fact, the glory of divine revelation that, in order to communicate with his people, God did not shout culture-free maxims at them from a distance. Instead, he stooped to their level, entered their history, assumed their culture and spoke their language. Yet this divine condescension also creates acute problems of interpretation for us. For Scripture is a mixture of substance and form, of eternal truth which transcends culture and its transient cultural presentation. The former is universal and normative; the latter is local and changeable. But how shall we distinguish between them? More particularly, how are we to handle the cultural element in Scripture? Three main answers are given, and it seems to me that disagreement on this issue lies at the root of disagreement on the interpretation of the text before us.

First, there are some who *enthron* the cultural form, and invest it with the same normative authority which they attribute to the truth it expresses. Because it belongs to the Word of God, they feel unable to tamper with it in any way. So they adopt a rigid literalism, and regard other approaches as evasions of 'what the Bible plainly teaches'. If they are consistent in interpreting 1 Timothy 2:8–15, they will then insist that men must always lift up their hands when they pray (8), that women must never plait their hair or wear jewellery (9), and that in no circumstances may women teach men (11–12).

Secondly, there are others who, while refusing (like the first group) to distinguish in Scripture between eternal truth and its cultural expression, then go to the opposite extreme. Far from enthroning both, they *dismiss* both. Instead of upgrading the cultural expression to the level of eternal truth, they downgrade the eternal truth to the level of its cultural expression. Instead of investing both with divine authority, authority is denied to both. Since God's Word is clothed in such ancient cultural dress, they argue, although it may have spoken to people long ago, it is now completely out of date and irrelevant. Consequently, Paul's entire instruction to Timothy about the men's prayers, and about the women's adornment and submission, must be jettisoned. There is virtually nothing worth salvaging, for nothing is 'eternal', everything is merely 'cultural'. For example, A. T. Hanson has written: 'Just as the first half of this chapter showed us the author at his best, so the second half seems to show him at his worst. Christians are under no obligation to accept his teaching on women.' Similarly, although less stridently, William Barclay writes: 'All the things in this chapter are mere temporary regulations to meet a given situation.'⁵⁷

It is understandable that liberal commentators, who lack respect for the supreme authority of canonical Scripture, should feel able to be so dismissive. It is worrying, however, when conservative scholars argue somewhat similarly. To be sure, they do not affirm that the cultural conditioning of Scripture altogether undermines its contemporary authority, but they say that certain passages are so culture-specific that they do not apply to us, and we may safely ignore them.

Even Dr Gordon Fee, whose judicious commentary on the Pastoral Letters in general I warmly recommend, seems to me to fall into this trap. Drawing attention both to the importance of Ephesus as the centre of the cult of the goddess Diana/Artemis and her foul rites, and to the success which the false teachers were having among 'weak-willed women', he adds that 'within that context' Paul's instructions on women 'can all be shown to make sense'. But Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:11–12 'is specifically related to the problem in Ephesus. He obviously did not take this position about women in general.' Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger further develop this principle of specific local application in their remarkable book *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11–15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*. It is a *tour de force*, the fruit of much painstaking research into the ancient world. I share their concern that this text has been

improperly and oppressively used to deny women legitimate ministries. For without doubt Scripture affirms the leadership of many intelligent and gifted women. How then do the Kroegers handle the text in more than a hundred pages? Describing Ephesus as ‘a bastion of feminine supremacy’, dominated by the great goddess, ‘Diana of the Ephesians’,⁶¹ and infiltrated by weird Jewish and Gnostic myths, the Kroegers re-interpret every phrase of verses 11–15 as applying exclusively to that context. ‘Let a woman learn in quietness and full submission’ (11) is an instruction to Christian women, in contrast to the ‘babbling nonsense’ of the Gnostic women, to be taught in, and be silently submissive to, the Word of God. ‘I do not permit’ (12a) refers to ‘a specific and limited situation [*sc.* in Ephesus] rather than a universal one’. The teaching which women are forbidden to give refers only to ‘wrong doctrine’.⁶³ The ‘authority over a man’, which is equally prohibited, is not only a domineering one, but means that a woman must ‘not proclaim’ herself the ‘author’ or ‘originator’ of man. The Gnostic myths that woman was responsible for both the creation and the enlightenment of man are contradicted by Paul’s references to the priority of Adam (13) and the deception of Eve (14). Nevertheless she will be ‘saved’, not condemned (15).

I acknowledge that this reconstruction is coherent and ingenious, and evidences great learning and profound reflection. By it each of the seven or more constituent parts of verses 11–15 has been reinterpreted in reference to the heretical ideas which were probably circulating at that time. When I had finished the book, however, I had a strong sense of ‘overkill’. Does this text really have nothing normative to say about the relations between men and women? Have those words ‘authority’ and ‘submission’ (11–12) been evacuated of any contemporary significance? Surely, there is still something left in the complementarity of our created sexuality which God intends for the enrichment of our human experience? As Dr Dick France concedes, even though it runs against his main thesis, ‘the New Testament reveals ... a wide-ranging concept of “order” (*taxis*) which God has designed for human society at many levels’, and which demands ‘submission’ (*hypotagē*), including that of a wife to her husband in marriage. ‘To submit is to recognise your place within the God-given order of society, and to act appropriately to that place, by accepting the authority of those to whom God has entrusted it.’

It is this which leads Dr J. I. Packer to express his continuing conviction ‘that the man-woman relationship is intrinsically non-reversible ... This is part of the reality of creation, a given fact that nothing will change. Certainly, redemption will not change it, for grace restores nature, not abolishes it.’ He therefore supports the proposal that we should ‘theologize reciprocity, spiritual equality, freedom for ministry, and mutual submission and respect between men and women—within this framework of non-reversibility ... It is important that the cause of *not* imposing on women restrictions which Scripture does not impose should not be confused with the quite different goals of minimizing the distinctness of the sexes as created and of diminishing the male’s inalienable responsibilities in man-woman relationships as such.’ I fully agree.

The danger of declaring any passage of Scripture to have only local (not universal), and only transient (not perpetual) validity is that it opens the door to a wholesale rejection of apostolic teaching, since virtually the whole of the New Testament was addressed to specific situations. Whenever we can show that an instruction related to a particular context, shall we then limit it to that context and declare it irrelevant to all others? For example, the command to be ‘subject to rulers and authorities’ was addressed to Cretans whose rebellious spirit was proverbial;⁶⁹ does it therefore not apply to non-Cretans? We might similarly argue that what Paul wrote about homosexual practice, simplicity of lifestyle, the uniqueness of Christ, world evangelization and many other topics was fine for his day. But times have changed, we belong to different cultures, and (some would add) we know more about these things than he did. So what he wrote has no authority over us.

So far, I have suggested that we should reject the two opposite extremes in relation to the cultural element in the biblical revelation. We might call them 'literalism' (enthroning both) and 'liberalism' (dismissing both). The third and mediating position is 'cultural transposition'. For this we have to discern in Scripture between God's essential revelation (which is changeless) and its cultural expression (which is changeable). Then we are in a position to preserve the former as permanent and universal, and transpose the latter into contemporary cultural terms. Thus, in response to Jesus' command to us to wash one another's feet, we neither obey literally and go round washing people's feet, nor dismiss the passage as having no relevance to us, but discern what is intrinsic (no service will be too menial if we love one another) and then transpose it into the realities of today (we will gladly wash the dishes or clean the toilet).

It is my belief that the most helpful way to handle verses 8–15 is to apply to them this *principle of cultural transposition*, and to recognize its applicability to all three topics, namely men's prayers (8), women's adornment (9–10) and women's submission (11–15). In the case of the first two, the application is not difficult. Take verse 8. Always and everywhere the men are to pray in holiness and love. But their bodily posture as they do so (standing, kneeling, sitting, clapping hands or raising arms) may vary according to culture. Next, verses 9 and 10. Always and everywhere women must adorn themselves with modesty, decency, propriety and good deeds, but their clothing, hairstyle and jewellery may vary according to culture.

Would cultural transposition be appropriate in verses 11–15 also? We note that verses 11 and 12 contain two complementary instructions to or about women. Positively, *a woman should learn in quietness and full submission* (11). Negatively, she is not *to teach or to have authority over a man* (12). Further, the antithesis is double. On the one hand, she is to learn in quietness and not teach. On the other hand, she is to be submissive and not exercise authority over a man. Or, to express the double antithesis more sharply, a woman's behaviour in public worship is to be characterized by quietness and/or silence, not teaching, and by submission, not authority.

This brings us to the key question: what is the relation between these two antitheses? Are they simply parallel and therefore equally normative? Is a woman both to be silent and not teach, and to be submissive and not wield authority, with no distinction between these instructions? This is what many commentators assume. But must submission always be expressed in silence, and 'not exercising authority' in 'not teaching'? Or could it be legitimate to see the submission—authority antithesis as permanent and universal (because grounded in creation, see verse 13), while seeing the silence—teaching antithesis as a first-century cultural expression of it, which is therefore not necessarily applicable to every culture, but open to transposition into each?

Some readers will doubtless respond that there is no indication of this distinction in the text itself. For verses 11 and 12 contain just two prohibitions (teaching and having authority) and two commands (silence and submission). This is true. But the same could be said about verses 8 and 9. There is nothing in the text of verse 8 which requires us to distinguish between the commands to lift up holy hands and to be rid of anger and argument. Nor is there anything in the text of verse 9 which requires us to distinguish between the commands to women to dress modestly and to avoid hair-plaiting and jewellery. Yet a Christian mind, schooled in the perspectives and presuppositions of the New Testament, knows that its ethical commands and their cultural expressions are not equally normative and must therefore be distinguished. So it recognizes in verse 8 that holiness and love are ethical, but hand-lifting is cultural, and in verses 9 and 10 that decency and modesty are ethical, while hairstyles and jewellery are cultural. Why then should we not anticipate that the same distinction between the ethical and the cultural is to be found in verses 11 and 12? The context (with its three regulations about prayers, adornment and submission) should at least make us open to this possibility.

We should begin by affirming, against what is fashionable and ‘politically correct’, that a woman’s ‘submission’ to male ‘authority’ is in God’s purpose normative. Paul develops this teaching most fully in 1 Corinthians 11:2ff. And here in verses 12 and 13 he supplies a biblical basis for it, especially that *Adam was formed first, then Eve* (12). Some scholars dismiss this as an example of Paul’s ‘tortuous Rabbinic exegesis’, but I for one claim no liberty to disagree with the apostles of Christ. His argument for masculine ‘headship’ from the priority of Adam’s creation is perfectly reasonable when seen in the light of primogeniture, the legal rights and privileges accorded to the firstborn. For Adam was God’s firstborn. In addition to being created after Adam, Eve was created out of him and for him, to be a helper suitable for him and corresponding to him.

Not that ‘authority’ is to be understood in terms of decision-making, let alone the wielding of unlimited power. In Ephesians 5:21ff., in the context of the reciprocal relations between husbands and wives, Paul interprets the husband’s position as ‘head’ of his wife as modelled on Christ being ‘head’ of his church. And this is a caring not a crushing headship, a headship of self-sacrifice not self-assertion, of love not pride, intended to be liberating not enslaving. Nor is male headship incompatible with sexual equality, any more than the assertion that ‘the head of Christ is God’ is incompatible with the unity of the Father and the Son in the Godhead.

If, however, the authority—submission antithesis is to be retained as creational, may not the teaching—silence antithesis be regarded as cultural? May not the requirement of silence, like the requirement of veils, have been a first-century cultural symbol of masculine headship, which is not necessarily appropriate today? For silence is not an essential ingredient of submission; submission is expressed in different ways in different cultures. Similarly, women teaching men does not necessarily symbolize taking authority over them. Teaching can be given in different styles, with different meanings. Thus public prophesying by women was not regarded as an improper exercise of authority over men, presumably because it took place under the direct inspiration and authority of God.⁷³ Nor was Priscilla’s teaching of Apollos inappropriate, because she gave him private instruction in the home, and Aquila was present, sharing in the instruction.

What, then, about the second biblical basis for Paul’s instruction? If his first argument was derived from the creation (*Adam was formed first, then Eve*, verse 13), his second was derived from the fall (*Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner*, verse 14). The popular explanation of this is that the woman was shown up in the fall as constitutionally prone to deception and that on this account she should not teach men. But there is a fatal objection to this. If women are by nature gullible, they ought to be disqualified from teaching anybody, not just men, whereas Paul refers to the special role of women in teaching both children and younger women.⁷⁶ It is more probable, therefore, that the essence of Eve’s part in the fall was not that she was deceived, but that she took an improper initiative, usurped Adam’s authority and thus reversed their respective roles.

In the end, our decision whether women may ever teach men, or be ordained to the pastorate, or exercise other leadership roles in the church, will depend on our understanding of the nature of pastoral leadership. If we belong to the Reformed tradition and see the local presbyter as essentially an authority figure, responsible both to teach the congregation and to exercise discipline (including excommunication), then we are likely to conclude that it is inappropriate for women to occupy such an authoritative position.

Supposing, on the other hand, we begin our thinking about Christian pastoral leadership with the teaching of Jesus in Mark 10:35ff., where he drew a distinction between two human communities whose leaders operate on different principles. In the world, he said, ‘officials exercise authority over them’. But, he added, ‘Not so with you.’ Instead, in his community greatness would be measured by service.

Why should it be thought inappropriate for women to exercise such servant-leadership? They have done so throughout biblical history. Besides, there are now no authority figures in the church, who can teach like the apostles in the name and with the authority of Christ. The New Testament is now complete, and all Christian teachers are called to teach humbly under its authority. If then a woman teaches others, including men, under the authority of Scripture (not claiming any authority of her own), in a meek and quiet spirit (not throwing her weight about), and as a member of a pastoral team whose leader is a man (as a contemporary cultural symbol of masculine headship), would it not be legitimate for her to exercise such a ministry, and be commissioned (ordained) to do so, because she would not be infringing the biblical principle of masculine headship? Our answer to this question is likely to depend on whether we consider it legitimate to apply the principle of cultural transposition to verses 10 and 11.¹

¹ Stott, J. R. W. (1996). *Guard the truth: The message of 1 Timothy & Titus*. The Bible Speaks Today (74–81). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.