



St. John's, Hensingham

THE VICARAGE, EGREMONT ROAD, WHITEHAVEN, CUMBRIA CA28 8QW
01946 692822 fpe@rson.justbrowsing.com

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Dear members of St John's,

If you have been involved at St John's for at least 18 months you will be aware that we have been taking time to consider the questions of women's ministry in St John's. Let me briefly bring you up to speed on why we have been doing this.

1 Timothy 2

In the course of preaching a series of sermons on 1 Timothy I was preparing to preach on the second half of 1 Timothy 2. As I studied verses 12-14 I found myself unable any longer to stick to the position I had been holding. The words in question are Paul's words, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man".

I used to argue that Paul here permits women to preach but not to hold the authoritative teaching role in the church. In other words, a woman could preach but could not have the position of vicar. However, the more I tried to find a way to present this in my sermon, the more I found myself unable to justify it from the text in front of me. The text simply did not say (and could not be made to say) what I wanted it to say. Many people argue that Paul's instructions are culture-bound and so we should apply them differently in our different culture. But Paul establishes his teaching firmly from Scripture itself, and even from a time in Scripture before sin entered the world (1 Tim 2:13-14). For this reason I cannot see how the cultural argument holds.

In the end, in the sermon on the Sunday, I said that the text must mean that Paul does not permit women to teach men and that this certainly would apply in the main church meetings. This of course raised the question of women preaching at St John's. I said that because it was me who had changed my view it would not be fair suddenly to impose my view on the church. So I suggested we take a year to think these issues through.

That year—and more—is now up. We have had one or two general meetings to discuss the issues, and I have spoken to everyone who has raised questions with me about it. I know that a number of people do not agree with me, and that it is an extremely difficult and painful issue for some. However, we must also bear in mind that God himself has given us these words. And here God teaches clearly, it seems to me, that women are not to be teachers over men. While it is not a core issue in that it does not define who is or who is not a Christian, nevertheless it is teaching—like every other biblical teaching—that needs to be taken into account and obeyed.

Other New Testament References

There are two other references in the New Testament that have a bearing on this question. First, in Acts 18:26 Priscilla and Aquila (in that order) invited Apollos

“to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.” Of the seven times this couple is mentioned in the New Testament, Priscilla's name comes before her husband's five times. This suggests that she took the lead in some sense.

Secondly, in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul assumes without any hint of censure that at Corinth women both pray and prophesy—presumably out loud in the church meeting.

Now when we come to apply these three parts of Scripture to our own church we have to give proper weight to each one rather than allow one to trump the others. And we must also be careful not to make rules where Scripture is silent. To be over-zealous with our own rules in order to protect God's word is to do what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing.

Applying this to St John's

Therefore, it seems to me that a good way forward for St John's is to say that while it is not appropriate for a woman to preach to the congregation gathered at church services, or perhaps to lead a Bible study that is mostly attended by men, we must promote and encourage women's ministry in other ways at St John's—at Sunday services as well as elsewhere in the life of the church. I am assuming that God has gifted women with teaching and other gifts and that these are to be used within the bounds that this same God has given us in Scripture. There must be flexibility rather than nit-picking as we work these things through. I know that as a church we must work harder than we have done to strengthen and expand women's ministry in these ways.

If we can say with the psalmist, “I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches” (119:14) then in seeking to be faithful to him we should expect to have a sense of joy and delight in his service. If we approach each other with this attitude then we can promote trust and love while happily submitting ourselves to God.

I am praying, and I hope all of you will join me, that this issue will become constructive for us at St John's rather than divisive. I would love to see all of us working together to bring the gospel to those who don't believe and building each other up in our common faith. We must not let disagreement or hurt deprive us from taking up these primary responsibilities as sons and daughters of God.

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peggy Pen'.