

The Pastoral Epistles: Ministry, ordination and women by Andrew and Lis Goddard

Introduction

The focus for this paper is the rather limited one of the pastoral epistles. While in one sense this makes the task easier it also makes its value more limited. The decision to focus here is, of itself, significant especially as we spent some considerable time in our first meeting looking together at 1 Timothy 2. The risk is two-fold. First, the risk of giving a privileged position to Paul's three last letters and downplaying or sidelining other contributions to a New Testament understanding of ministry, ordination and women's leadership. Any conclusions drawn from these letters needs to be related to the gospels, the witness of Acts concerning the early apostolic church and the teaching and witness of other Pauline and non-Pauline epistles (including Rom 16 and the designation of Junia as an apostle¹ and Phoebe as a leader²). In particular, charismatic evangelicals will often look to 1 Corinthians and its account of church worship and participation and focus on gifts rather than ordination and office as a guide for church structures and the roles of men and women. Second, the risk of taking the particular solutions given to the difficult situations addressed here – countering false teaching in the context of the dying out of the apostles and the lack of a written canon of apostolic teaching - as in some sense a transcendent and normative blueprint or divinely given manual for church order to which the church must conform.

What follows offers some brief observations on key passages from the pastorals that have a bearing on the question of the role and leadership of women in relation to church offices: 1 Tim 2.8-15, 1 Tim 3.1-13 & Titus 1.5-9 and 1 Tim 5.1-2. It draws particularly on the work of two evangelical New Testament scholars – Kenneth E. Bailey and Philip B. Payne – to show that attempts to appeal to these letters as a basis for a male-only church leadership are not as strong as they might at first appear or as Christian tradition and our translations have claimed.

1 Tim 2.8-15

As this passage was dealt with in some detail at our first meeting and a paper presented by Emma Ineson, the following simply summarises three key points:

First, the problem of false teaching is the central problem that Paul is addressing in this letter. The gender of the false teachers is not clear but Howard Marshall notes there are 'strong indications that women were involved in the heresy (and therefore teaching falsely)'.³ One pointer to this is the similar language used for both women and false teachers (eg 1.6, 20 and 5.15 in relation to turning away and Satan) while 4.7 refers to the false teaching in terms of "godless myths and old wives' tales". The description of women in 5.13 includes *phylaroi* which though often falsely understood as referring to 'gossips' is often used for teachings or philosophies opposed to truth. Payne concludes,

First Timothy's many statements regarding problems caused by women depict a situation where women had become central to the false teaching that was dividing the church. The evidence for this is so strong that it has led three of the most

¹ On this, Schreiner in his review of Payne's *Man and Woman, One in Christ* has recently acknowledged that 'Junia was almost certainly a woman, and Paul identifies her as an apostle'.

² See Ian Paul's earlier paper on this as well as Payne, 61-63.

³ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 466 quoted in Payne.

prominent advocates that 1 Tim 2.12 forever prohibits women from teaching or having authority over men to acknowledge, respectively: “The false teachers had persuaded many women to follow them in their doctrines (1 Tim 5.15; 2 Tim 3.6-7” [Moo]; the text “explicitly pictures only women as being influenced by the heresy” [Mounce]; and “it is likely that the prohibition [1 Tim 2.12] is given because some women were teaching men” [Schreiner].⁴

Second, the limits placed on women in 1 Tim 2 are not expressed in terms of a prohibition which prevents them holding particular offices in the church. These are not mentioned here and indeed as discussed below a strong case can be made that women were eligible to hold offices.

Third, the word often translated “exercise authority” in 2.12 is *authentein*, a NT hapax and a very unusual term. It is not the usual term for the exercise of authority and as Payne notes, “Not even one instance of the later ecclesiastical use of *autheteo* with the meaning ‘to have authority over’ or ‘to exercise authority’ has been established before or near the time of Paul”.⁵ One cannot therefore take 2.12 to offer an explicit prohibition on women holding any office that involves exercising authority over a man.

1 Tim 3.1-13 and Titus 1.5-9

In most English translations of 1 Tim 3.1-13 the list of requirements for overseers (*episkopoi*) and deacons is filled with masculine pronouns (or even ‘man’ and ‘men’) giving the impression of a determinedly all-male club. However, as Payne notes, this is an interesting interpretation on the part of translators as ‘in Greek...there is not even one masculine pronoun or ‘men only’ requirement’.⁶

Some focus on the reference to a ‘one woman man’ as a sign of a men-only requirement but this is not intended to exclude women (or single men) but rather to exclude polygamists and adulterers. This is now recognised even by those who do believe in male headship. So Moo concludes ‘it would be going too far to argue that the phrase clearly excludes women’⁷ and Schreiner in his review of Payne’s book admits “The requirements for elders in 1 Tim 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9, including the statement that they are to be one-woman men, does not necessarily in and of itself preclude women from serving as elders. . . .”⁸ In fact, in contrast to a gender-specific focus, in both 1 Tim 3 and Titus, Paul speaks generally of “anyone” (*tis*) saying that ‘anyone/whoever desires the office of overseer desires a good work’ (3.1,5).

Even more significant is the fact that each of the requirements for an overseer in 1 Tim 3 have verbal or conceptual parallels in passages in 1 Timothy itself regarding women. Payne’s careful statistical analysis of Paul’s use of the nine words or expressions to describe overseers and his descriptions of women in nearly identical terms concludes that ‘the author

⁴ Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 304.

⁵ Payne, 373.

⁶ Payne, 445.

⁷ Moo quoted in Payne, 447.

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner’s “Philip Payne on Familiar Ground: A Review of Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters*.” *JBMW* (Spring 2010): 33–46, here at 35.

of 1 Timothy intended to make it undeniable that these qualifications of overseers not only can, but in fact do, apply to women'.⁹

Although this gender-blind reading of the discussion of overseers is contested, it is now generally agreed that 1 Tim 3.11 explicitly refers to women in church office as deacons alongside men (despite the distinctions some draw and the CofE used to draw between deacons and deaconesses and the claim of some that it refers to the wives of male deacons). As Bailey notes, in discussing verse 8-11, 'the two lists exhibit striking parallels'.¹⁰ This acceptance of women deacons (on the same terms as men) is confirmed by Paul's reference in Rom 16.2 to Phoebe as a deacon, the title Timothy himself is given in 1 Tim 4.6 and Paul applies to himself and Apollos in 1 Cor 3.5. This equality in relation to deacons combined with the lack of gender-specific restrictions in relation to presbyters or overseers and the clear evidence that women can fulfil the requirements laid down in 1 Tim 3 seriously undermines the case that the pastorals require the church to prohibit women from holding certain offices or fulfilling certain functions in the life of the church.

1 Tim 5.1-2

These verses are not often considered as relevant to questions about ordination, the presbyterate and the role of women because they are thought to refer simply to older men and women and to begin a new section of argument in Paul's letter as marked by the start of a new chapter (and often a new heading) in our translations: 'Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity' (NIV)

Although this is possible, it is also possible, as Kenneth Bailey argues, that the verses should be read as a continuation of chapter 4.¹¹ There, in v14, Paul has referred to the laying on of hands which Timothy received from the *presbuterion*, the council of elders (*presbuteroi*). Then just a few sentences later he uses the masculine singular '*presbutero*' - male elder (which is how it is generally translated elsewhere) and the feminine plural '*presbuteras*' - female elders. The traditional reading has been to render these as 'older man' and 'older women' rather than as a reference to elders. This is because they come in clauses with 'young men' and 'young women' and it is therefore reasonable to assume that it is a text referring to age.

Bailey however points out another option, suggesting that Paul is using a chiasm or inverted parallel here. This is a very common form of rhetoric in ancient times which we see throughout the Scriptures. It presents a series of ideas, comes to a climax, then repeats the series backwards: A,B,C,B,A. Bailey suggests that when this letter was first written, without our current chapter or paragraph breaks, the author intended that in the discussion here of ministry this rhetorical device would be at work as follows:

⁹ Payne, 452.

¹⁰ Bailey, 'Women in the NT: A Middle Eastern Cultural View', *Anvil* (1994), Vol 11 No 1, pp 7-24.

¹¹ What follows summarises the argument put forward in the *Anvil* article noted above but taken from its republication in *Theology Matters* (2000), Vol 6, No 1 where it appears at pp 4-5

1. Instructions to Timothy (as a minister) 4:6-11 [A]
2. Timothy and the Elders (and the young) 4:12-5:2 [B]
3. Older Widows (and the young) 5:3-16 [C]
4. Timothy and the Elders 5:17-20 [B]
5. Rules for Timothy (in regard to ordination) 5:21-22 [A]

As Bailey notes, the crucial question is whether (2) and (4) represent a pair which incorporates 5.1,2 within a discussion of elders. He argues that section 4 breaks into two sections which concern first good (vv17-18) and then troublesome elders (vv19-20).¹² The parallel between 4.12-5.2 and 5.17-20 is clear, he claims, in the appearance (as in the later 5.17-20) of two kinds of elders – first those who have ordained Timothy (4.12-16) and who are not criticised and then difficult elders (5.1-2) whom Timothy is tempted to rebuke but warned not to. Rather, he is to treat the male elder like a father and the female elders as mothers. He thus concludes that ‘paragraphs 2 and 4 can be seen as parallel discussions of ministry’ and if this is so ‘then the presbuteras in 5:2 are women elders ordained and engaged in ministry in Timothy’s congregation’. Interestingly, signalling the continuing problem with translations, Bailey notes that the NRSV places ‘or an elder, or a presbyter’ as a marginal note to presbutero in 5:1 but not to presbuteras in 5:2!

Bailey notes the conclusion of Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Studies at Temple University (USA), who writes,

...in [1 Timothy] 5:1-2 the words presbutero and presbuteras are usually translated as ‘an older man’ and ‘older women’, but in this context of discussion of the various ‘officers’ of the church, a perfectly proper translation—which, if not more likely, is at least possible—would be ‘male presbyter’ and ‘woman presbyters’.

Probably the strongest argument against this translation is the reference to youth in these verses (*neoteros* and *neotera*) but Bailey notes that twice in the larger passage there are references to youth in texts that also discuss formal ministries (4:12-16 and 5:9-16) and that the same pattern appears also I Pet. 5:1-5 so it is not unique to have eldership and youth rather than age and youth here in 1 Tim 5.

Conclusion

Although the Pastoral Epistles are often appealed to as one of the most sure New Testament foundations for limiting certain offices to men, in fact despite their many other qualifications they nowhere require presbyters or overseers to be male or explicitly prohibit women from any office. In fact, they acknowledge women deacons and – according to Bailey and Payne among others – could point to women elders and overseers. They also, as noted in the

¹² He then notes that early paragraph divisions treated 5.1-2 as a separate section rather than the start of what follows in relation to widows in v3, a merging which took place only in the 13th century and which he says is odd given the lack of reference to *presbuteroi* in 5.3-16 but the reference to them in 4.14.

introduction, need to be set in the wider context of the New Testament. When that is done Bailey's conclusion is well-supported:

In summary, the NT has clear cases of women disciples, teachers, prophets and deacons/ministers. We have near certitude in perceiving Junia to be a female apostle. It is possible to see female elders in 1 Tim. 5:2. Thus women appear on nearly all, if not all, levels of leadership in the NT Church.¹³

¹³ Bailey, 5. If it is argued that in the NT no women are explicitly identified by name as elders, overseers, or pastors then three points need to be noted. First, that this in itself would not mean women should not fulfil these roles any more than the lack of named Gentiles restricts these offices to Jews. Second, we do have women named as deacon, apostle and leader. Third, as Payne notes, "apart from Christ (Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4), no men or women overseers (ἐπίσκοπος) of a church or pastors (ποιμήν) of a church are named in the NT. John refers to himself in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 as "the elder," but nothing in either context associates this title with a local church or with administrative duties. The article indicates that this refers to something unique, which would not apply to local church administration. It probably identifies something like the last surviving elderly apostle and eyewitness of Christ. The only other NT association of 'elder' with any named person is Peter's self-identification as a "fellow-elder (συνπρεβύτερος), a witness of Christ's sufferings." (From <http://www.pbpayne.com/?p=501>).