

A Community Without Barriers

Manhattan Church of Christ
Sermon: December 5, 1999 by Thomas Robinson
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Scriptures

Acts 2:14-24

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

17 "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

18 Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

19 I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

22 "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Galatians 3:23-29

23 Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. 24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

1 Corinthians 11:2-6

2 I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you. 3 Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-- it is just as though her head were shaved. 6 If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

34 Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

1 Tim. 2:8-15

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. 9 I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, 10 but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. 11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing-- if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

A Community Without Barriers The Place of Women in the Community

The theme for our meditation this morning is “A Community Without Barriers.” Last week we talked about our mission statement, and this week I want to develop some issues that grow out of one of those lines expressing our mission: “to create a loving community of Christians.” I think you will also see, however, that when we talk about the kind of community we want to be in this place, almost all aspects of our mission come into play—our commitment “to study and follow the Bible,” our aim “to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ,” our desire “to worship and glorify God,” even our intent “to serve people in need.”

Many Discussions, Many Viewpoints

The more particular aim of this message will have to do with the place of women in the life and work and worship of the congregation. This is a topic that has been very widely discussed in Churches of Christ and in almost all other Christian groups, and there are many divergent points of view. I don't know how many books, articles, and commentaries I've read and how many speeches I've heard over the years that in one way or another dealt with the topic. One good example of the kind of work and thought that is going into this topic is found in two volumes of essays written by members of the Churches of Christ entitled *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, edited by a man who has himself worked very extensively on these issues, Dr. Carroll D. Osburn, a professor of New Testament studies at Abilene Christian University.

Some time ago, I myself taught an extended series of studies in my Sunday morning adult class that examined passages throughout the Bible that contribute to the biblical teachings about women. We dealt with the Creation narratives, the Law of Moses, and various Old Testament examples of women. Then we looked closely at the Gospels and Jesus' treatment of women and interactions with women. We went through the book of Acts and the New Testament letters with their important passages. I handed out extensive notes on the exegetical and theological issues. We also looked briefly at the later history of the church and the history of our own movement in the United States. We discussed the ways that the interpretation of certain influential passages developed and shaped the traditional practice of Churches of Christ and many other evangelical churches as well.

I have also discussed the topic with many individuals and groups within the congregation. And I know that many of you in various conversations and groups have developed your own understandings of the issues.

The elders of the congregation have also studied and discussed the ministry of women in our congregation, and have been very gratified at the increasing roles of ministry that the women here have undertaken.

I know that at the present moment there are few topics of discussion that bring forth stronger feelings. In this arena the interpretation of scripture is only one factor, though I believe it should be the most important factor. But other things also come into play—our own stories, our understanding of our lives and our parents' lives, our experience of controversies in churches, our desires for change or our fears of change. Then there are our views of the message that our congregation is conveying to the outside world by our practices, our sense of tradition, our comfort zone, our understanding of the relation of our faith to our culture and society—these all regularly come up in discussions.

Till now I have preferred to talk about these issues in smaller group discussions rather than in sermons, because I felt that such settings better lent themselves to interactive questions and studying together. But I decided to focus on the topic this morning because as we come to the end of this century and millennium, it is important for us to think together about the road ahead.

It also seems that the intensity level of concern in the congregation has been rising in recent weeks and months. I have had numerous men and women talk to me about their desire to see women much more active publicly in the assembly, though there are differing feelings about just what that should entail — making announcements, reading scripture, prayer, serving the Lord’s Supper.

I’ve also talked with a few of you who had substantial objections to women singing solos in special music or taking a leading role in other ways such as participating in a dramatic reading of scripture.

In many of the open forums that we have had on Sunday afternoons, questions about women’s role in the congregation are a major concern.

I know that we have represented in our congregation almost the complete range of views that are held by people who strongly believe in the inspired authority of the Bible and want to follow God’s will in all aspects of their lives: From many who believe the Bible points to women taking a very active public role to others who believe that the Bible bans any public role at all. All across that spectrum, the views that are held are held sincerely based on a genuine desire to “study and follow the Bible.”

The Importance of Principles of Interpreting Scripture

It is also definitely true, however, that sincere and detailed study of the Bible can lead to very different applications. A lot depends on the conceptual framework you use and the questions you ask when you approach God’s word. Sometimes that conceptual framework and those questions are the least carefully examined part of our thoughts about the Bible. That’s why I’ve been teaching on Sunday afternoons, and then on Sunday mornings a series of studies on how we know the will of God from the Bible: *“How to Read the Bible for all It’s Worth.”*

My own understanding of these issues grows not so much out of simply focusing on the debates around the role of women in the church—though I have studied those—but from my overall study of the Bible and especially the New Testament. That began just a little over 35 years ago when I first began preaching and intensively studying the Bible, learning Greek, Hebrew, etc. That process has continued throughout my educational work, my years of seminary teaching and the years of teaching and preaching here.

The way I approach and try to understand the many scriptures that speak of women is simply part and parcel of the way I believe we should approach scriptures on other topics. It is all part of a whole, and for me a very important element in how we find and follow God’s will for us in his word.

I don’t want to be mysterious or coy in setting forth my views, since I’ve invested a lot of prayer and thought and study in reaching them. But I also am a bit reticent, since I don’t want in any way to squelch discussion but rather to spark careful study and prayer about these issues in a way that will foster love in our community.

Where the Scriptures Lead

Where do I believe the scriptures lead us? With all my heart I believe that the scriptures show us that **every Christian — man or woman, boy or girl — has the privilege granted by God to use every spiritual gift that God has given to them in any setting, public or private, so long as they are genuinely advancing the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, and acting in a way that manifests love to others.** In this, I believe that **God is deeply involved** in giving us spiritual gifts and that he wants us to use them.

God intends his people to be a **community without barriers** — one in Christ — **all** using the **varied gifts** that the **Spirit of God** has given them to the **fullest possible extent** so that we all grow together “to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13).

I believe that **the limitations that are placed on women** in two congregations in the New Testament — in Corinth (1 Cor. 14:34-35) and in Ephesus (1 Tim 2:11-12) — **are imposed for cause.** They are **not universal and arbitrary punishments** placed on women for being born women and not men. Though they do respond to a society and culture in which any open participation by a woman in a public assembly was considered scandalous and offensive, in these cases the cultural context was combined with **particular offenses committed by these groups of women that brought on the specific limitation spelled out in the letters.**

The Character of the Scriptures God has Given

At the risk of caricaturing my own views, I want to step back for a moment and spell out in the briefest possible way a couple of **principles of interpretation** of the New Testament that I think are crucial for understanding the New Testament, especially the epistles or letters of the New Testament.

First, **when God gave us the New Testament** with its four Gospels, its Acts, and its Letters, **he knew exactly what he was doing**. It is important that God **chose** to reveal his will for the ongoing life of the Christian communities through **letters to specific churches** and not through law books. We have Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, etc. and not a book of law like Leviticus. This is not to say anything against Leviticus. It was just the law book that God wanted to give ancient Israel, but it is not the same by any means as the letters of the New Testament.

Letters and Law Books

A book of law is intended to be comprehensive and universal, to specify in the abstract how things are to be done forever, or at least until the law is revised or rescinded.

A letter by its very nature is specific and limited. It is addressed from a particular person to a particular person or group at a particular time with regard to particular problems or circumstances. Now it certainly may have much wider relevance, as all the letters in the New Testament do, but that wider relevance is always somewhat indirect and comes by interpreting the original situation to which the letter was written.

In many ways, letters are particularly poor as law books. There is almost always information about problems, situations, and people that is known to the writer and the recipients of the letter that helps to make sense of what is written. Later readers struggle to understand because they are in effect reading one side of a two-sided dialogue, as though listening to only one end of a telephone conversation.

But that difference from a law book is not a weakness of the letters but **their strength**. **God did not want his new covenant to be law-based**. As Paul argues so forcefully in Romans and Galatians, even the best law — holy and just and good — becomes a powerful and destructive instrument that sin uses to destroy a trust in God and replace it with trust in self and one's own accomplishments. **God wanted a different kind of community based on his grace and the power of the Holy Spirit working vigorously and transformingly in the lives of his people. The letters are perfect for helping us build such a community**. They allow us to look into the living laboratory of the early church to see how they learned and experienced the Gospel, what struggles they had, how many errors they made, how Paul and Peter and others guided by the Holy Spirit helped them to overcome their problems and find their way back to the Gospel. They are our authoritative guides as they take us into the life of communities created and empowered by the Gospel.

Difficulties When Letters are Misunderstood

Unfortunately, very often Christians have insisted on reading the letters as if they were law books — turning Romans and 1 Corinthians into Leviticus. So many denominational splits and divisions have arisen from this process of trying to force the Letters to be something God did not intend them to be.

In our own tradition, we have had dozens of such divisions on a greater and smaller scale over exactly how certain statements in the Letters or in Acts should be turned into law. We need desperately to trust more that God knew what he was doing and to learn a different way of applying the letters that is true to their character and does not transform them into something that God never intended them to be.

Core Values and Secondary Values in Scripture

The second general point that I want to make deals with the way the letters shape and direct the life of the early Christians. Over and over again, in these letters we observe Paul trying to help Christians to weigh the various aspects of their experience of faith in order to know what is more important, what is less important, what is marginal, and what is unacceptable and wrong.

There are some things that are **core values** that must be maintained and fought for no matter what. There are many things that are wonderful and valuable and should be maintained unless in some way they come into conflict with the core values. There are also many things that are acceptable and have good potential but may readily be pushed aside in favor of some higher good. Paul seems often to find himself helping Christians to sort these things out when they have gotten them all bollixed up.

The Core: The Gospel and the Cross of Christ

The absolute core value for Paul is the Gospel, the Good News of what God has done in Jesus. That Gospel must get through to people in its own unadulterated power. Everything — heaven and earth — is at stake in that message. People, souls, live or die based on that message. Nothing is more important because it tells what the God of

the universe is doing in our world. Anything that blocks the Gospel so that people cannot hear it or distorts the Gospel so that its essence and power are changed is utterly unacceptable.

And **at the very core of that message is the cross of Jesus Christ**, the embodiment of the self-giving love of God poured out for us when we did not deserve it. That central vision of the love of God in the cross sets the standard and defines all the values of the Christian life. Paul asserts that even something so crucial as faith is secondary to love (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Relating Secondary Values to the Core

So we watch Paul as he deals with these growing Christians.

Yes, he can say, all things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; not everything builds up. Knowledge is good, but your knowledge puffs you up; your love builds you up. (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:12ff.; 8:1ff.; 10:23). Yes, it's fine to eat anything, unless it destroys your brother or sister's faith. (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:4-13; 10:23-30). Yes, it's good to speak in tongues, unless you're doing it in a way that makes people think you're crazy so that they won't listen to the Gospel. Then, you've got to stop. (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:18-25).

And so it goes. That process of evaluation of what is more and less important, what is aiding the message of the Gospel and what is blocking or distorting it, goes on again and again in the letters. It is that life laboratory of the early church.

How Values of Culture are Related to the Gospel

That process also goes on in the letters in evaluating the **cultural practices** of the society in which the church lives. **The Gospel at its core establishes a set of values from God that are fundamentally different from the values of the world in any age.** But if that revolutionary, transforming message is to get through to lost people, the church must stay in the world and survive. So Paul urges the Christians at Corinth not to withdraw so much from the world, and he tells how he adapts his life to various cultures and traditions in order to communicate the Gospel more effectively (1 Corinthians 5:9-10; 9:19-23).

At the **core**, Christians must not be conformed to the world but be **transformed** by a **renewal of mind**, Paul says (Romans 12:2). But in many more superficial ways, Paul urges the Christians to adapt to the societal expectations of the time. Wear the veils that people expect. Don't wear your clothing or your hair or whatever in a way that expresses something shameful to the people around you. (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:31-33)

The Issue of Women in Culture and Gospel

How does all this relate to the issue of women's role in the church? The scriptures show that a community of love without barriers is an ideal that is greatly to be desired. As we will see, Paul relates that ideal closely to the core values of the Gospel. But it is not the core itself. Such a community without barriers stood in radical contrast to the highly stratified and hierarchical society of the Roman empire. In Roman law, women and slaves had little or no power at all, and even the great majority of men had no power to affect the laws or rules of society in any way. Even to imagine a community without barriers was a leap of faith. It could become a reality only if the Gospel in its power could create a community that lived by its standards.

Important Passages (1): 1 Corinthians 11

But in those communities in the New Testament where substantial restrictions are placed on women, the Gospel had become seriously distorted. 1 Corinthians is practically a textbook of Paul dealing with the many ways the Gospel could be confused and blocked and distorted in one community. We do not have time here to go into the details of interpretation of these passages (though extensive exegetical and interpretive work has been done), but I just want to summarize a few observations about the three passages that have been most debated and most often discussed around this issue.

In **1 Corinthians 11:2-16**, Paul lets us know that **both men and women were praying and prophesying** in the community, but the way that they were dressing — the way women were uncovering their heads or men covering theirs — was read by others as scandalous. People saw the scandal of their dress and could not hear the teaching of their prophecy. Paul urges them — indeed he insists on it — that both men and women conform more to the expectations of the society in which they lived — wear the veils, have the haircut — so that what they were saying by their dress did not destroy the far more revolutionary message of the Gospel.

Important Passages (2): 1 Corinthians 14

In **1 Corinthians 14**, especially vv. 34-35, Paul is in the midst of dealing with a **long series of problems** among the Corinthians with their practice of spiritual gifts and the **destructive disorder** that was rampant in their times of assembly. Earlier, he warned them that their practice of the Lord's Supper had become so distorted that it was no longer the Lord's Supper. Paul is pleased with the vitality of their worship, in which everyone seems to participate, but a lot of things have gone wrong so that **the times of assembly neither build up the community nor help the outsider to hear the Gospel**. It is unclear to us as we read the letter exactly what the nature of the problems were. Too many were speaking in ecstatic tongues; prophets were competing with each other for attention — something like that. **Paul tells each of these groups to be silent** so that the worship time can fulfill its function. He assures them that “you can **all** prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged (1 Corinthians 14:31).

In that context he also deals with a **problem with some women in Corinth**. What Paul says seems to indicate that these were **wives who were not prophesying but were interrupting their husbands to ask questions** in the assembly—something that was considered in those days a deep insult to their husbands. Various attempts have been made to reconstruct exactly what was happening. But we can have no real certainty. In any case Paul takes them to task for behavior that was scandalous and shameful — the same words he had used about not wearing veils— and he directs them to follow the practice common in that day of keeping silent and asking their husbands at home.

Important Passages (3): 1 Timothy 2

1 Timothy 2 especially vv. 8-15 is a passage with many puzzles. If one reads it as a law book using any of our common English translations, it seems a lock-down example of total exclusion of women from any public role in worship because of a fundamental flaw in the female nature shown in the fact that Eve was deceived in the Garden of Eden.

But the more closely we examine the passage in its context the clearer it becomes how deeply **these injunctions are connected to the situation of that church in Ephesus**. The fundamental problem was that of a congregation that had seriously gone astray in distorting the Gospel with Gnostic mythologies — what Paul refers to at the end of the letter as “*falsely so-called knowledge*.” The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*, the basis of the word “gnosticism” (1 Tim 6:20). This involved a distorted fascination with genealogies, laws banning the eating of certain foods, with a denigration of sex and procreation so that they were forbidding people to marry (1 Timothy 1:4-7; 4:3). In both 1st and 2nd Timothy Paul makes clear that this doctrine had made its greatest inroads among women in Ephesus as well as some men (2 Tim 3:6; 1 Tim 1:20). Strife was rampant. False teaching had to be confronted forcefully.

Prayer and Dress

Notice, however, that many questions arise in the process of interpreting these verses. First of all, it is certainly possible to read 1 Timothy 2:8-9 to say that men were to pray and women were simply to dress in a modest way. That is the way most modern translations take these two verses. But the original Greek text also opens up a very different kind of translation that highlights that both men and women pray (as in 1 Corinthians 11), but each group in Ephesus needed to reform its practice in a particular way. As one of the leading commentaries on 1 Timothy translates these verses, “As far as prayer is concerned, I wish that men everywhere would raise holy hands, without a thought of anger and strife. And the women should do likewise, in modest deportment with chastity and prudence.” [*The Pastoral Epistles*, by Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, p. 44.]

The emphasis on clothing shows that the message being conveyed to outsiders by these women in Ephesus was distorted so that people could not see the values of the Gospel. Should these sentences be treated as universal law so that all wearing of gold or a string of pearls or braided hair is forever banned? I think, certainly not. And what about expensive clothes? Exactly when do clothes become so expensive that they break such a law? If a law is to mean anything, it's important to know. Are only clothes from K-Mart acceptable? Are clothes from the Gap beyond the pale, or is it just things bought from Gucci and Prada? Surely the problem is not one of law but of values and spirit. The wealthy women in Ephesus were acting and teaching in a way that embodied the values of the false teaching that was such a problem in the church.

Teaching and Domination

Therefore, Paul rescinds his permission for these women to teach. “I do not give permission for a woman to teach or to domineer over the men.” You'll notice that I translated that phrase “to have authority” (as it is usually translated) as “to domineer.” It comes from the Greek word *authentain*, which is not the usual word for having

“authority” over someone, which is *exousia*. In the standard Greek dictionary, two definitions are given for *authentain*: 1.) to have complete power over, and 2.) to murder! (Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*.) Certainly something very serious was going on here, something in which a lot was at stake.

The Deception of Eve

Then there is Paul’s analogy of the Ephesian situation to the Garden of Eden. In preparation for these studies I have read a number of interpretations of this section, including some that argue that Paul shows that this is eternal law by arguing from creation. Eve was deceived in the Garden; therefore, women have a basic weakness in their character that makes them easily deceivable and thus disqualifies them from teaching. Adam, on the other hand, was not deceived but knew full well what he was doing when he openly and purposely rebelled against God. This shows that men are better spiritual leaders and teachers than women. I hope that it is apparent that such reasoning is way off base. Paul is probably simply drawing an analogy between the role of Eve, who was deceived and led Adam astray and the actions of these Ephesian women who were leading in teaching the false doctrine that forbade marriage and led to a wholesale distortion of the Gospel.

Saved by Bearing Children

Notice, finally, perhaps the most puzzling phrase in the passage, the statement about being saved through childbearing. Actually the Greek says it a little more strangely than what we have in the New International Version. It says, “she will be saved through bearing children if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.” This is a sentence that almost every commentary has difficulty with, and very divergent interpretations result. The reason is that, on the surface, what this sentence says is simply false. Nobody is saved by bearing children. We are saved by grace, through faith, marked by our union with Jesus in baptism, etc. No one is saved by having kids. Such an idea so flatly contradicts what Paul and the rest of the New Testament teaches, that everyone sees that the sentence must mean something other than what it seems to say. But often it is precisely such a strange statement in a text, such an anomaly, that points us to see how deeply a text is enmeshed in the concrete situation to which it was written. There is something that made sense of this statement, something that was known to Paul, Timothy, and the church there in Ephesus, but that is not obvious to us.

My guess — and I admit that it is only a guess — is that this statement about bearing children is a kind of shorthand that would have been understandable to the people in Ephesus. The false teaching in Ephesus involved forbidding marriage. In their Gnostic belief, bearing children was seen as an evil that kept the divine element in human beings trapped in fleshly bodies. Marriage was forbidden so that children would not be born and thus the cycle of flesh would not continue. These women, Paul asserts, could be “saved” and restored by giving up their false rejection of marriage and childbirth and returning to an understanding of human life as a gift of God, that is, by returning to the truth of the Gospel. I readily grant that I may be wrong in this interpretation, but I am not the only one. If you go through the many commentaries, you will find every sort of variation possible. And I’m not alone in pondering this verse. By itself, this verse is sufficient to show how closely these limitations on women are linked to a specific situation and problem.

“Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion”

Lest anyone think that I am wholly askew or original in these conclusions with regard to these passages, I want to read a couple of brief statements from one of the scholars in the Churches of Christ who has devoted a lot of time to the study and analysis of these problems.

I mentioned earlier that Dr. Carroll Osburn has edited two books of essays about *Women in the Earliest Church*. He has also written a book called *Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion* [revised and expanded as *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal*. ACU Press, 2001]. Dr. Osburn’s full title is the Carmichael Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University. He has given a full exegesis of these passages and drawn his conclusions. First, I want to read his conclusions about 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, from p. 110 [rev. 204-205] in his book.

Far from being intolerant, Paul neither teaches nor suggests in this text anything regarding hierarchicalism or female subjection. ... The real issue is not the *extent* to which a woman may participate in the work and worship of the church, but the *manner*. Paul’s corrective does not ban women from speaking in worship, but stops the disruptive verbal misconduct of certain wives who are giving free rein to “irresistible impulses” to “pipe up” at will with questions in the assembly by redirecting these questions to another setting where they can gain access to information without causing chaos.

Referring, as it does, to a very specific problem of disruptive questions by these women, 1 Cor. 14:34-35 teaches that these particular wives, like the uncontrolled tongue-speakers and prophets at Corinth, must *defer* to the assembly by voluntarily yielding to orderliness. The general principle that is to be applied to contemporary church life is that decorum is mandatory for all in the public assembly without regard for gender.

Later, when Dr. Osburn is talking about 1 Timothy 2:8ff., he says (p. 115 [rev. 251-252]) that the text

was directed to a specific group of troublesome women in a particular place in the early church. Their particular problem was specifically that of being misinformed and domineering teachers. In overstepping traditional roles, some Ephesian Christian women demonstrate a fundamental attitudinal shift which evidences itself in their dress and in forsaking traditionally domestic roles in a quest for visible roles in congregational life. Such domineering and assertive behavior, ... certainly sent the wrong signals to Ephesus about what Christianity was all about. Hence, Timothy is admonished forthrightly to counter this sinister development in the Ephesian congregation.

It may be concluded that wherever there are misinformed, unreliable, and domineering women attempting to teach Christian truth, the ancient admonition of Paul to Timothy has direct application. However, nothing is said in this text about informed, reliable, and gentle women teaching — either in church or out, either on religion or not, either to men or women, either to young or old. No biblical text has been so misused to legislate so many prohibitions which stifle so much service by so many people. Put simply, any female who has sufficient and accurate information may teach that information in a gentle spirit to whomever in whatever situation they may be.

While the particular situation Paul addresses in 1 Timothy arose due to particular women who were misinformed and domineering, the point of the text would be equally applicable to any men who were in a similar position.

A Community Without Barriers Envisioned in the New Testament

Finally, I want to return to the idea of the core values that set us on this journey to seek understanding of the scriptures. We began this morning with the readings of two passages of scripture from the New Testament, the first from **Acts 2** describing the opening moments of proclamation of the Gospel in the power of God's Spirit. When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on that **Pentecost morning**, strange things began to happen. Suddenly, the disciples spoke and Jews who had come from nations scattered all across the Roman empire and beyond could understand their speech miraculously in their local native language. The patchwork veil of languages that had divided humanity into competing groups was for that moment torn in two so that everyone could understand the Good News in the language that was closest to their own heart.

But there were some who heckled and made fun of what was happening. It was then that Peter intervened to defend this sign of the Holy Spirit and to explain the message that was behind this miraculous reuniting of people across the barriers of culture. What was happening was far more than what the skeptics had imagined or feared, he said. And he showed this by citing **a passage from the prophet Joel, carefully chosen because of what it said about what was beginning here as the Gospel came into the world:**

*"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel," Peter said,
"In the last days, God says, I will pour out **my Spirit on all people.***

*Your **sons and daughters** will prophesy,
your **young men** will see visions,
your **old men** will dream dreams.*

*18 Even on my **servants, both men and women,**
I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and **they will prophesy.***

*19 I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.*

*20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.*

21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' (Acts 2:16-21)

This was an outpouring of God's Spirit on all his people, Peter asserted. In earlier times, real prophets who could teach the will of God to the people had been few and far between. For long periods, no prophets had been known, but now God's Spirit would be available to all people:

*Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.*

18 Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy....

21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' (Acts 2:17-18, 21).

This Gospel was so important! The news of what the God of the universe had done in Jesus Christ was so astonishing and stupendous! The reach of this Gospel was so universal and its effects so transforming that God intended that **every person, male and female, young and old, free and slave might be enrolled as a prophet to proclaim and teach this good news.**

It was like one world coming to an end and another beginning:

blood and fire and billows of smoke.

The sun ... turned to darkness and the moon to blood ...

This ...great and glorious day of the Lord. (Acts 2:19-20)

That's how this all began — the promise and the vision with which this Gospel, which we proclaim right down to this day, burst forth into the world.

A Community Without Barriers Described by Paul

The second passage is from Paul's letter to the **Galatians (3:23-29)**. Here Paul is writing to groups of Christians, evidently in house-churches in various cities and towns of Galatia. (It was an ethnic region in the interior of modern-day Turkey.) They were almost entirely Gentile (non-Jewish). They had received the Gospel of Jesus enthusiastically, even from a Jew such as Paul. But after Paul left for other areas, other Christian teachers had come to them. These teachers were also Jewish, but unlike Paul, they believed that if any non-Jews were to become Christians, they must become part of the Jewish people by keeping the laws of circumcision and other commandments. They said that Paul was just trying to please people and make it easy on them by not imposing these laws (Galatians 1:10).

Paul had nothing against these laws — quite the contrary, in his letter to the Romans, he declared them “holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12) — but he knew that to impose such laws as part of the way of salvation so changed the Gospel of Jesus Christ that it was no longer the Gospel (Galatians 1:6-7).

Because of these teachers who had come to Galatia, the Galatian believers had felt a barrier rise between themselves and Jesus Christ. They were taught that their faith in Jesus was not sufficient, their baptism was not sufficient, their experience of the Spirit in their lives transforming their lives by the fruit of the Spirit was not sufficient. Rather, they must climb over the barrier of the law because only those inside the barrier were saved.

Paul said, “Absolutely not!” In the Gospel **God had torn down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles.** When they “were baptized into Christ,” they “clothed themselves with Christ.” **Christ became their garment, their identity. No barriers allowed.**

From this realization, Paul does not just tell them, “Now you Gentiles are just as good as the Jews; you can do practically everything they can do.” He states it much more emphatically, because it is **the meaning of the Gospel**, brought to them by their baptism into Christ: he says, **“There is no Jew and Greek.”**

That statement might seem to settle the thorny problem between Jews and Gentiles in Galatia, though certainly the problem went on. But Paul doesn't stop with that problem in this passage. His understanding of what the Gospel means when we are clothed with Christ is so emphatic that he adds on two other areas of human life where similar barriers continually arise. Not only is there no Jew and Gentile or Jew and Greek, he says, there is also no **slave or free**, and there is no **male or female**. Again, he chooses to speak in the most emphatic terms. Not simply that one group can be just as good as another, or that God loves both, or whatever, but **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** (Galatians 3:28).

Powerful Truths, Not Yet Brought to Realization

With regard to all three elements — Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female — there were clearly possible blockages in that era of Roman hierarchical society. Paul talks in other places about how he adapted to the sensibilities of Jews and Greeks in order to save people. He went to the mat, as it were, with Peter in order not to put barriers before the Gentiles as they became Christians (Galatians 2:11-21). The challenge to break down ethnic

barriers, however, is a perennial problem that persists to our day, to our city, even to our congregation. We are still in the process of fully learning all the implications of the truth that **in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek.**

Neither Slave nor Free

Slavery also was embodied in law and tradition and deep-seated cultural fears in that society. It was only the most prominent and most hurtful of the barriers that cut across that stratified society. No Christian could even affect much less overturn the laws that prescribed the strictures of slavery in Roman society. Therefore, when the New Testament writers deal with slavery in concrete life, they help slaves and even masters learn how to transform that given structure from the inside by the values of the Gospel (Eph. 6:5). Peter even draws a close analogy between the suffering of slaves and the suffering of Jesus in his death (1 Pet 2:18). Had Christian slaves as a group rebelled against their masters, their entire community could have been destroyed.

But the fact that slaves are told to obey their masters and masters to treat their slaves with kindness, does not mean that God has any interest whatsoever in maintaining the institution of slavery as a requirement for obedience to him. In later centuries, in our own country, when slave-owners used these scriptures to impose slavery and obedience, they were making a mockery of the scriptures. The core aim of the Gospel is not slavery but freedom for all—freedom for all no matter how long it took to realize that reality. **In Christ there is no slave and free.**

No Male and Female

So it is also with regard to the roles of women. The freedom given in Christ is close to the core values of the Gospel, as Paul shows in Galatians 3:28. But such freedom practiced by women was **always a very touchy issue in that ancient Roman society**, in which women were granted very few rights and the lives and actions of respectable women were highly circumscribed. In that milieu, when the actions of women in the church caused scandal that blocked the message of Jesus or when they actively participated in distorting the Gospel, the need for the truth and power of the Gospel had to be valued above their freedom, without question.

But the limitations imposed in these offending situations were **never** intended to be permanent disabilities limiting for all time the service of women and their use of the gifts God has given them. That important aim of the Gospel to break down barriers for all was not permanently lost; it simply waited for the opportunity to reassert itself: *“all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* In our own time and place, the opportunity and challenge to realize that ideal of the Gospel is clearly present. The summons to break down such barriers not only rings out from the words of scripture but also is also heard from many voices in our common society. We Christians, of all people, should seek to build a community that brings to realization as fully as possible all that the Gospel means when it says that we are all **one** in Christ Jesus.

Practicing a Community Without Barriers

I hope that as you think about these reflections, you will do so with prayer, study and a great deal of love for each other and the whole body of God's people. We have a great opportunity here in our congregation to embody that fundamental principle of love that Paul taught to the Romans in Romans 14-15. Christ had welcomed them and Christ has welcomed all of us. We are not in a position to stand in judgment or condemnation on each other. We need to seek first to love each other and to understand each other clearly, and to discuss these matters openly without conflict and rancor, always giving each other the benefit of the doubt. As Paul says so pointedly with regard to some of the disputed issues of his day, *“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld for the Master is able to make him stand. ... Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. ... Welcome one another, therefore as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”* (Romans 14:4-5, 15:7)

And so my brothers and sisters, I want to hold up before you **that ancient vision of a community without barriers**, a community **created by the Gospel**, made up of people who have **clothed themselves with Jesus Christ** so that there is among us **neither Jew nor Greek** (there is no ethnic division); there is **neither slave nor free** (there is no socioeconomic division); there is **neither male nor female** (every gift that God gives to every woman and every man may be fully used for the glory of God).