

Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling

A risky but rewarding renovation

Thank you for the opportunity of speaking today. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land on which we gather, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation ... and I'd also like to acknowledge the brave and persistent elders of this movement; the Movement for the Ordination of Women, past and present – including the former great leader of the movement, Patricia Brennan, who it was my privilege to meet and stand side-by-side with way back in 2008. It is an honour to again be asked to join cause today, and to speak on this topic of 'Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling: a risky but rewarding renovation.'

Breaking glass ... *anywhere* ... could be considered risky - especially when the ceiling being broken is made of stained glass - beautifully wrought and meant to be around for a long time – or so some might argue.

I am hoping there are people here today who do think there is risk involved in allowing and encouraging women to rise to all levels of leadership within the church. I hope we are not all of the same mind. Almost certainly there are people here today who would disagree with the subtitle that breaking the stained glass ceiling is a *risky* renovation. They would think, *you might think*, this is not risky *at all* – but is simply the most sensible thing for the church to do. It is not risky. It is right. It is the only right thing to do.

You might be right, and so let me begin this talk by agreeing with you, and suggesting some reasons that you might offer for thinking that this proposed renovation is not risky. In the second half of the talk, I'll suggest some reasons for thinking it is risky ... or likely to be seen as risky by some.

Some reasons to think it is not risky

A **first** good reason for thinking that this renovation is not risky is that such renovations have been occurring for some time now without noticeable damage or disaster (except perhaps to the egos of some men). The stained glass ceiling is already in the process of being dismantled all over the world.

A second cousin of mine who lives in Norway told me recently that they have had women ministers and bishops for years. In his Lutheran Church, women have been ordained as priests since 1938; Denmark and Sweden followed suit just after World War 2.

The Lutheran Church of Norway ordained its first female bishop in 1993; not quite sure why it took so long, but my cousin was quick to say what a blessing the ministry and leadership of women has been, and how widely accepted it has been.

Within our own Anglican Communion, women have been ordained from as far back as 1944 (at that stage a temporary wartime measure in Hong Kong). In 1971, the Diocese of Hong Kong and Macao became the first Anglican province to officially permit the ordination of women to the priesthood. Quickly to follow Hong Kong's example was the US, Canada, New Zealand, Kenya, Uganda, Ireland and Australia in 1992.

It is easy to feel discouraged about the pace of change, but it is worth noting that out of the 23 Anglican Dioceses here in Australia, only 4 do not ordain women as priests.¹

The Anglican Communion has had women bishops since 1989;² Australia since 2008. Up until the sad loss of Bishop Barbara Darling just last Sunday, we had five female Anglican bishops; now four, with two of those in charge (or soon to be in charge) of a Diocese.³

The Church of England, in England, has finally consecrated its first female Bishop in Libby Lane, new Bishop of Stockport, just under a month ago. And so the ‘times they are a-changing,’ and the stained glass ceiling is already being broken, without any obvious damage or disaster that I am aware of.

And, to move on to a **second** reason for thinking that this renovation is not risky, the gradual breaking of the stained glass ceiling has been preceded and accompanied by the gradual breaking of the larger glass ceiling. Outside of the church, and in the realm of secular pursuits, women have shown themselves to be more than able to hold their own and excel, even within pursuits and occupations where men continue to dominate.

We’ve benefitted from any number of highly skilled and, in some cases, trend-setting female politicians, including Julia Gillard, Tanya Plibersek, Julie Bishop, Dame Quentin Bryce and Dame Marie Bashir. For myself, I have been hugely impressed by the ability, courage and values of Professor Gillian Triggs - the head of Australia’s human rights watchdog.

Women are leading (and being in charge of and have authority over) men and women at every level of almost every secular organisation. The retiring CEO of Westpac, Gail Kelly, who was the best paid CEO of a major bank in Australia, is proof enough that women can successfully break through the glass ceiling.

Women are equally competent academically. They have been teaching in universities and colleges for generations; with no obvious damage or disaster to the academic careers of those who have benefitted from their scholarship.

There is a **third** reason for thinking this is not a risky move. It is easy enough to point to contemporary examples of women leading and teaching men (to our benefit), but, perhaps surprisingly, there is very good evidence to suggest that women were teaching and leading men (without controversy) within the New Testament itself.

Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, is described in Acts 18 as ‘expounding the way of God more fully’ to Apollos (a high profile, well credentialed and well informed) evangelist.

¹ The Dioceses North West Australia, Armidale, Sydney and The Murray. In 2007, 12% of Australia’s Anglican priests were women. I am not sure what the figures are today

² Barbara Harris was ordained suffragan bishop of Massachusetts in February 1989.

³ The first women ordained as bishops were the Rt Rev Kay Goldsworthy (assistant bishop, Diocese of Perth) on May 22, 2008 (subsequently elected 12th bishop of the Diocese of Gippsland in the south-eastern Australian state of Victoria on December 11, 2014; due to be installed on 21 March 2015.) and the Rt Rev Barbara Darling (assistant bishop, Anglican Diocese of Melbourne) on May 31, 2008. Three more women have since been ordained as bishops: the Rt Rev Genieve Blackwell, Regional Bishop of Wagga Wagga, in the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn (March 31, 2012); soon to move to Melbourne to take the position vacated by Barbara Darling; the Rt Rev Alison Taylor, Bishop of the Southern Region, Anglican Diocese of Brisbane (April 6, 2013) and the Rt Rev Sarah Macneil, Bishop of the Diocese of Grafton and the first woman to be a diocesan bishop in the church (March 1, 2014).

The New Testament also mentions Phoebe, a (perhaps the only) deacon of the church of Cenchreae. She is described in Romans 16:2 as having been a protectress or patroness to many, including St Paul. The Greek word used, *prostasis*, is used in its masculine form to describe governors, chieftains and leaders of a democracy. The word is even used to describe Jesus.⁴ Phoebe was clearly a very impressive lady, and is at least likely to have exercised her considerable authority in the context of the church at Cenchreae.

Women assumed the roles of prophet in the early church; rated above teachers in Paul's list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28. One woman, Junia, is referred to in Romans 16:7 as 'notable among the apostles.' Chrysostom, preaching on this text, noted:

To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles, just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been, that she was even deemed worthy of the title apostle.⁵

There is every good reason (exegetically & Biblically) to believe that women assumed roles of leadership and teaching within NT churches.⁶

The *only reason* for thinking otherwise is that one passage, just one passage in the whole of the NT, *can* be taken, *has* been taken to prohibit women from teaching and exercising authority over men in church.

Which brings me to a **fourth** reason for thinking it is not a risky thing for women to break through the stained glass ceiling: and that is that you don't need to be exegetically irresponsible to do so.

Those who are opposed to the ordination of women to all levels of the church's hierarchy very often appeal to 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as the lynchpin of their case against allowing women to lead and teach men in church. You are sure to be familiar with these words:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

These are notoriously difficult verses to understand and interpret, making them a less than ideal basis for building one's case upon. Taken at face value (and employing a common sense reading) these verses appear to imply that men ought to have some sort of priority over women because they were created first. Traditionally, Christian theologians have interpreted this creational priority as implying the inferiority of women. As Luther put it, 'Adam is approved as superior to Eve⁷ ... As the sun is

⁴ In 1 Clement 36:1 and 61:3

⁵ B. Booten, 'Junia: Outstanding among the Apostles' (Romans 16:7) in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declarations*, eds. L. and A. Swindler, NY: Paulist Press, 1977, 141.

⁶ Other women in the New Testament likely to have exercised leadership include Philip's daughters, the Chosen Lady, Nympha of Laodicea, and Euodia and Syntyche.

⁷ *Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on Timothy*, vol. 28 of *Luther's Works*, ed. H. C. Oswald, trans. E. Sittler and M. Bertram, St Louis: Concordia, 1958, 278, 279.

much more glorious than the moon (though the moon is glorious), so the woman was [created] inferior to the man.’ This has commonly been assumed throughout church history.

As for Eve being deceived, and not Adam, this has *almost universally* been interpreted as implying that women are more easily led astray, more gullible⁸ – and that is the reason they should not be allowed to teach men, or be in a position of authority over men.

Thankfully, those aren’t the only ways to interpret these contentious verses, as contemporary defenders of the stained glass ceiling readily admit, and they have, therefore, had to come up with other suggested interpretations of these verses.

My own considered opinion is that a very sensible and cogent case can be made that the author of these words from 1 Timothy (which many accept to be St Paul) was providing occasional instructions in the context of a very particular and dysfunctional situation within the church at Ephesus.

The writer *may* have been appealing to Genesis because he saw within Genesis a pattern that God intends to persist for all time (that is possible), but he *may also* have been using Genesis illustratively to critique the abusive behaviour of a group of women at Ephesus – in an attempt to put a stop to this disruptive and abusive behaviour. And so for that time, in those circumstances, women were not to teach or have authority over men.

There are very good indications within the text, and within the context of these verses, that this way of interpreting them is a sensible one.⁹

If one takes, as one’s approach to the Bible, the grammatical-historical approach (which is commonly employed by evangelicals), an approach which takes account of the grammar, syntax and context *as well as* the likely historical background, then, a really good case can be made that we shouldn’t be reading this text in such a way as to overthrow other texts and the general tenor of the New Testament – not to mention the quite radical examples of Jesus and St Paul.¹⁰

There is a **fifth** reason for thinking that breaking the stained glass ceiling doesn’t need to be seen as risky, and that is because it is now *mighty hard* to defend the preservation of the stained glass ceiling.

⁸ It has easily been the most common interpretation of this expression that women are more gullible. As one English evangelical (Donald Guthrie) put it back in 1957, the weaker sex has a ‘greater aptitude ... to be led astray.’ Quotation included in a lecture given by Kevin Giles, entitled ‘Women in history, theology and the churches today.’ Also included are the following statements from some of Christianity’s well known theologians: Tertullian, ‘And do you not know that each of you is Eve? You are the devil’s gateway: you are the first deserter of divine law.’ Augustine of Hippo: ‘Whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman ... I fail to see what use a woman can be to a man, if one excludes the function of having children.’ Aquinas: ‘woman is defective & misbegotten.’

⁹ Take for example, the Greek word *epitrepo*, translated in 1 Timothy 2:12 as ‘I do not permit,’ ... I do not permit a woman to teach etc. Andrew Perriman points out that every instance of this word’s use in the New Testament is related to a specific and limited set of circumstances; See further Perriman’s article at – www.tyndalehouse.com John Toews notes that the use of this word in the Septuagint almost always relates to a specific and limited situation. John E. Toews, ‘Women in church leadership: 1 Timothy 2:11-15, a Reconsideration’, in *The Bible and the Church: Essays in Honor of Dr David Ewert*, ed. A.J. Dueck, H.H. Giesbert and V.G. Shillington, Hillsboro: Kansas, Kindred, 1983.

¹⁰ For examples of this case being skilfully argued, I’d suggest literature associated with and commended by Christians for Biblical equality (CBE). I would also commend the scholarly work of Rev. Dr Kevin Giles and Bishop Tim Harris (a class-mate of mine from Moore College undergraduate days, and now an Assistant Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Adelaide: for some very relevant material, some of which I drew upon for this lecture, see <http://newanglicanism.tumblr.com>); Also likely to be of great help is: Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters*, Zondervan, 2009.

I think it has got harder over time. One is forced, I think, to engage in mental gymnastics to stop the renovators coming in and removing the ceiling. It would be very much easier to step aside and let them do their work.

In preparation for this talk, I initiated a number of Facebook conversations. I basically asked people whether they thought it was risky or rewarding to break the stained glass ceiling. People were, it seems, reluctant to commit themselves on so public a forum (understandably, perhaps), and I pretty much failed to get anyone to say it was risky ... even though maybe a third of my 200-300 Facebook friends are complementarians – people who appeal to the complementary nature of male-female relationships to justify their opposition to the appointment of female rectors and bishops. [Pause]

The Rev. Canon Dr Colleen O'Reilly (originally from Sydney, and now vicar of the Parish of Malvern, in Melbourne) somewhat provocatively suggested that in the background to all the women's ordination debates she witnessed while in Sydney was the unacknowledged belief that women are not quite fully human, that their humanity was to some degree defective in comparison to men's. It *was* provocative, and it *did* provoke some useful discussion.

I then challenged the group to argue a case for the restriction of women's ministries that did not imply some degree of female inferiority (which, as I have said, has been the standard approach of Christian theologians throughout history). No-one, *at first*, took up the challenge; no matter how much I upped the ante, until one brave complementarian, a former student of mine, Paul by name, took up the challenge. He suggested, in his words, that ...

... [there is] 'an inherent relational dynamic resulting from fundamental differences between the sexes' which 'may make it difficult for men to be led by women in a church context.

Which is a valiant attempt, I think. In other words, men don't like to be led by women!

Which is probably right as a generalisation. The battle of the sexes is not a figment of the imagination! But, for me, it just doesn't seem a very strong reason for preventing women (let alone all women) from positions of leadership within the church.

And, of course, what he suggested begs the question of what are these 'fundamental differences between the sexes.' It is interesting that in the current context of this debate, most people (and probably including my friend, Paul) pull back from saying that women are less able to teach or lead. It is not that they don't have the necessary gifts or talents, or, in our context, experience, to fulfil any role within the church!

But that then begs the question of 'Why not ... break the stained glass ceiling?' And if the only answer is that men don't like women leading them (or that women like to have men lead them), this just doesn't seem (to me at least) a very convincing reason. In fact, it *sounds* like little more than glorified sexism!

Let me give another example of what I mean by the need for mental gymnastics. The current approach of complementarians is to argue their case on the basis of an 'order of creation.' Female submission and male leadership is grounded in the very way God has made males and females. Something intrinsic to their very natures is violated when women teach or exercise authority over men.

But then, if that is true, it is true in all spheres of life (not just in the home and not just in church). And so, for complementarians to be consistent, they would need to be opposed to (or at least a little uncomfortable with) having Julie Bishop or Tanya Plibersek as their Prime Minister; and would need to be opposed to (or at least uncomfortable with) women exercising authority over men at any level of any organisation.

Why? Because women are not meant to be leaders; they were created in such a way as to flourish best when taking a subservient role.¹¹ Once again, skilful mental gymnastics is needed to restrict the application of these verses to home and church.

Just for fun (but with some serious intent), let me put a creational case for female leadership – 8 good reasons for ordaining women rather than men to positions of leadership in the church.

1. A man's place is in the army.
2. The physique of men indicates they are more suited to such tasks as chopping down trees and wrestling mountain lions. It would be 'unnatural' for them to do ministerial tasks.
3. Man was created before woman, obviously as a prototype. Thus, they represent an experiment, rather than the crowning achievement of creation.
4. Men are too emotional to be priests or pastors. Their conduct at football and basketball games demonstrates this.
5. Pastors need to nurture their congregations. But this is not a traditional male role. Throughout history, women have been recognized as not only more skilled than men at nurturing, but also more fervently attracted to it. This makes them the obvious choice for ordination.
6. Men are prone to violence. No really masculine man wants to settle disputes except by fighting about them. Thus they would be poor role models as well as dangerously unstable in positions of leadership.
7. The New Testament tells us that Jesus was betrayed by a man. His lack of faith and ensuing punishment remind us of the subordinated position that all men should take.
8. Men can still be involved in church activities, even without being ordained. They can sweep sidewalks, repair the church roof, and perhaps even lead the song service on Father's Day. By confining themselves to such traditional male roles, they can still be vitally important in the life of the church.

This is quite funny you'll have to admit – regardless of what side of the fence you sit on, but it also has a serious side; a serious intent.

When I first read that 8th reason about men still being able to do important things like sweeping footpaths, I felt insulted. I actually did. I felt, just for an instant, what my sisters in Christ have been feeling for years, and still feel.

¹¹ In holding to this opinion, one would have a number of fine allies: John Calvin wrote that women 'are born to obey, for all wise men have always rejected the government of women as an unnatural monstrosity.' In a subsequent in his commentary on 2 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, he wrote: 'The teaching of Moses is that women were created later to be a kind of appendage to the man.' John Knox put it this way: 'and such be all women, compared to men in bearing and authority. For their sight in civic rule is blindness, their strength weakness, their counsel foolishness, and judgement.' Quotations (with references) from Kevin Giles, *Women in history, theology and the churches today*.

Someone from our mid-week Bible Study group mentioned the case of a young woman, keenly Christian, who feels she simply must leave the church she currently attends – because she has definitely picked up the vibes that as a young, single female, she is at the bottom of the heap. Her opinion is not valued or sought. She feels she is invisible.

And this might just be because the people at her church are being ungodly. The problem isn't their theology, it is their practice.

Maybe, but perhaps there is more to it than that. People who argue a complementarian case very often appeal to the notion of headship, articulated in passages such as Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11, which they interpret in authoritarian terms, and the argument often urged is that what happens in a marriage, or within a home, provides a paradigm for what should happen in church. Men need to be leaders and initiators of care in the home – and likewise in the church.

But two things typically happen when people accept this argument: Either they exercise their 'headship' in the home in such a way that issues of authority simply vanish – because the husband really does love the wife as Christ loved the church, in a loving, self-sacrificial way which evacuates the relationship of any power differential. Patriarchy might be there in theory, but not in practice OR Christians do take this teaching about male headship very seriously indeed, and all sorts of practical ways are found to express male authority and male competence to lead and teach, and women almost inevitably are made to feel second class citizens. A Facebook Friend of mine told me that he makes every decision in his family. He consults his wife (and perhaps his children), but, as the head of his wife, he makes every decision.

I cannot imagine his wife feeling anything other than inferior. Dale Martin, who lectures in New Testament Studies at Yale University, once wrote:

Any interpretation of scripture that hurts people, oppresses people, or destroys people [or, we might add, makes people feel inferior] cannot be the right interpretation, no matter how traditional, historical, or exegetically respectable.¹²

John G. Stackhouse, the Chair of Theology and Culture at Regent College in Vancouver Canada, one of many evangelical theologians who, in the last few years, have been 'converted' [his word] to an egalitarian approach, noted that crucially involved in his 'conversion' were his observations of the impact of efforts to re-impose patriarchy. In his words,

I needed to *feel* something of the pain of patriarchy: of being interrupted or ignored in conversation, of being passed over for recognition and promotion, of receiving condescension or suspicion instead of welcome partnership. And I needed to be confronted with their anger, with their refusal to be treated this way anymore.

Women have entrusted me with great gifts: their stories and their feelings about what they have been through and continue to encounter. My wife has told me of how people ignore her or interrupt her. Female friends, colleagues, and students have testified to the suffering they

¹² Dale B. Martin, '*Arsenokoitēs* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences,' in Robert Brawley, (ed.), *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 1996, 130.

have endured – from conversational condescension to professional marginalization to marital oppression to actual sexual or physical abuse.¹³

And that is what is made more likely if patriarchy, particularly stronger forms of patriarchy, are re-imposed. But, to draw together the strings of this point, if one takes a much softer and respectful approach, patriarchy all but vanishes. It becomes the irrelevance it needs to become – in my opinion.

Some reasons for thinking it is risky

So far, we have looked at some reasons to suggest that breaking the stained glass ceiling might not be such a risky thing, and might even be rewarding. But not everyone, and possibly not everyone here, agrees with this. Some believe this move would be risky – and I want, in what follows, to respect this point of view. I can think of at least 6 reasons why people believe that this move would be risky - not the sort of renovation one should undertake.

The **first** big risk, felt by lots of people in Sydney, is the risk of getting in trouble with God for disregarding what do seem (at first reading) to be quite clear and unambiguous instructions. I was chatting by e-mail to a friend (a fellow clergyman) who admitted to me, ‘I have no idea why God would restrict the [clearly very capable] ministries of women.’ He could not supply a credible (to himself) reason for any restrictions of role or ministry. His sole reason for following the party line was that this is how he believes the New Testament ‘determines it.’

That, I think, is the position of many in Sydney. I am sure that *many* are uncomfortable with these (apparently) Biblically mandated prohibitions in 1 Timothy. They certainly have contributed to the massive exodus of people of all ages from the church. In all sorts of surveys, Christian attitudes towards women (what they can do and what they can’t do) has been identified as a key blocker to belief in Christianity itself. It is a major turn off, especially when Christians seem so incapable of supplying a credible rationale. But my brothers and sisters here in Sydney (and elsewhere) simply can’t get past 1 Timothy 2, and some associated passages believed to bolster the case.

There is a **second** associated reason why people think it would be risky to participate in the breaking of the stained glass ceiling, and that is because they feel they don’t have the necessary competence and expertise to take on the high powered and highly trained theologians and Biblical scholars of the Diocese. They’ve not studied Greek. They haven’t read through the massive literature on the subject, and, even if they did, how would they be able to accurately discern the issues and balance of probabilities.

Complicated business, Biblical interpretation! As in most things, the best some people feel they can do is to trust their respected elders, and, in Sydney, the respected elders are men (mostly) with PhDs after their names. And they say it is wrong to break the stained glass ceiling. People feel that they are not in a position to argue. I know lots and lots of people in that category.

A **third** (and associated) reason why people are reluctant, even fearful, to even *consider* the wisdom of breaking the stained glass ceiling, is that complementarianism is the passionately held prevailing

¹³ J. G. Stackhouse, ‘How to Produce an Egalitarian Man’ in *How I changed my mind about women in leadership*, Alan F. Johnson (gen. ed.), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, 241.

view here in Sydney. It is one of the things the Sydney Anglican Church has become known for (around the world). It is a badge of honour; a key indicator of their fidelity to the Word of God.

And that is why it is pushed so strongly – in conference after conference after conference. And, as a position, you'd have to say it has prevailed. I was able to have coffee with the Principal of Moore College, Mark Thompson, in preparation for this talk. I had actually first got in touch with Jane Tooher, the head of the *Priscilla and Aquila Centre*, to have coffee with her, but she asked if Mark could come along – which I was thrilled about. Mark described the Diocese at the moment as happily and contentedly complementarian. And, moreover, he does not believe that is going to change anytime soon! He is probably right.

It isn't easy, in Sydney, to take a contrary line. It is not just that you will be taking on powerful, well organised, and extremely determined male heavy-weights, you are taking on a culture – and that is risky. If you do come to a different point of view (even a marginally different point of view), you run the very real risk of coming under suspicion, of being considered 'unsound' or 'dangerous', or, worse still, 'no longer one of us.' One of the participants on the Facebook discussion was told by a Bishop of the Diocese that she was 'one of them' because she was preaching to mixed gender congregations. She was also un-friended from Facebook by some of her now-former 'friends.'

All sorts of studies have shown that the threat of exclusion from a group (whether it be your family or your church or your social network) is about the most potent threat anyone can face. Sociologists suggest that connectedness within our families and other groupings is as fundamental to our well-being as our need for shelter and sustenance. Without it, we die. Separation is a form of death. The pain and grief of separation, I am told, is more intense than almost any pain, and so we try to avoid it at all costs.

Studies have also shown that people are more willing to ditch their doubts or contrary thoughts than they are to risk exclusion from groups they feel they belong to.

Now of course that is true in the whole range of social settings. If you are a lone conservative in a contentedly liberal diocese, or if you ditch your liberalism to become a conservative, naturally you will face the same scary threat of exclusion. So this isn't distinctive to Sydney, but in Sydney it is, nevertheless a factor preventing (or inhibiting) people from considering alternatives.

Let me suggest a **fourth** reason why some people are reluctant to even countenance the possibility of breaking the stained glass ceiling - and that is because they'd have to admit that their confidently stated beliefs don't warrant that level of confidence. They would have to admit uncertainty, which no-one likes to do, especially when engaged in passionate and important debates like this.

But one of the big dangers that often surfaces when people believe things really strongly, and especially when cultures begin to form around those strongly held beliefs, is that they become ideological sacred cows.

An ideology is a systematized body of ideas and associated values designed to guide and give meaning to those who adopt it. An ideology can be as broad as a worldview or a religion, or as narrow as an economic or political theory such as free market capitalism or communism. Evangelicalism is an ideology as is feminism as is complementarianism and egalitarianism.

Ideologies supply a way of thinking about things. They can also be coercive and restrictive, and exclusionary. Signing up to an ideology normally means joining fellow ideologues in the promotion and protection of your new way of seeing things. You are quickly socialized into a way of thinking and being which becomes the standard of inclusion for your group. Group loyalty and conformism kick in.

Ideologies are also prone to simplify and to smooth over difficulties in efforts to persuade their constituencies that they make best sense of a murky and/or threatening world. Ideologies attract adherents sometimes *because* they turn greys into black and white. And one of the great temptations for ideologues is to profess greater certainty about their beliefs than the evidence warrants.

I was interested, in talking with Mark Thompson, to notice how confident he was about his interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 (and associated passages). He didn't seem to have any doubt.

I asked him about what he inferred from the references to Adam being formed first and Eve being deceived, and he said, 'I don't think in terms of inferences.' When I pressed him to say how probable he thought his particular take on these passages was, he said, 'I don't think in terms of probability. What I am saying is simply what these passages mean.'

I was, at first, perplexed, but on reflection, later, I think I have come to understand. Mark is a passionate believer in the proposition that God is an effective communicator. What God wants us to believe, God makes clear to us. If we say it is unclear, the problem is with us, not God.¹⁴

The strength of this position is that we don't have to say, 'I *think* this is what God requires,' OR 'this is *probably* what God wants.' We can say with confidence, 'This IS what God is saying.' We are not left standing over the Bible deciding what is probable and what is not, we can obediently submit to the Bible and what it clearly teaches.

What Mark was saying kind of made sense to me – when I thought about it. Or, at least, I knew where he was coming from.

You may have heard of a recent contribution to this debate by John Dickson, a young and talented Sydney Anglican clergyman, who very modestly suggested (in a little booklet) that the word 'to teach' in 1 Timothy 2:12 may have had a specialized meaning with unique application to that early period of church history.¹⁵ Whether we agree with him or not what was interesting was how vehement was the response from *St Matthias Media*, who published a book in response - with Mark Thompson and Peter Bolt and Tony Payne and Claire Smith all contributing.¹⁶

¹⁴ An obvious problem with Mark's suggestion, when applied to 1 Timothy 2, is that current ideas about the meaning of this text are both multiple and at odds with how most theologians throughout church history have taken these verses.

¹⁵ John Dickson, *Hearing Her Voice - A Case of Women Giving Sermons* (Fresh Perspectives on Women in Ministry Series). Dickson attempts to demonstrate that the specific activity Paul disallows to women in 1 Timothy 2:12 'does not refer to a general type of speaking based on Scripture. It refers to a specific activity found throughout the pages of the New Testament. It means *preserving and laying down the traditions handed on by the apostles*. This is not easily equated with the explanation and application of a Bible passage found in today's expository sermon. If this is correct—the biblical warrant for excluding women from the pulpit is not strong,' 66-69.

¹⁶ Peter Bolt, Tony Payne (eds.), *Women, Sermons and the Bible: Essays interacting with John Dickson's Hearing Her Voice*, Sydney: Matthias Media, 2014.

One of the major concerns of that book was this issue of uncertainty. Dickson is accused of relying on uncertain background information, of ‘digging below the text,’ rather than submitting to the text, the meaning of which is believed to be obvious. The concern is that by fishing around for possible historical reconstructions, we are thereby evading the text’s clear and obvious meaning. As Peter Bolt puts it:

We are left in the hands of the scholars, hoping that the tentative but informed reconstruction we are following is the correct one (even though the scholar in the cubicle next door disagrees) so we might obey the voice of the living God, and not come under his judgement.¹⁷

In other words, if we adopt Dickson’s approach, we can never be certain about what God is saying to us, and we need to be.

This desire for certainty is understandable, but uncertainty is not so easily avoided. To mute or down-play the historical dimension to the grammatical-historical method does not increase our certainty about what the Biblical text means. It may, in fact, increase our uncertainty. The truth is that there are lots of uncertainties when it comes to interpreting just this one short passage from 1 Timothy. To mention a few of them:

- We simply *don’t know for sure* what the Greek word ‘authentein’ means - translated in the NIV as ‘to have authority.’ The word doesn’t occur elsewhere in the NT, and is not one of the normal words used by St Paul to mean ‘having authority.’ It is a word that has within its semantic range ideas of control or domination, and can even mean ‘to murder’. It seems to be a very strong word, which is why all early Latin, Coptic and Syriac versions of this verse translate the word as ‘to domineer,’ which certainly suggests a particular dysfunctional situation being addressed by these verses from 1 Timothy.
- We *don’t for sure* what is meant by the word ‘to teach,’ especially in relationship with that other word ‘to have authority’ or ‘to domineer,’ which uncertainty is reflected by an incredibly wide range of interpretations of the meaning and application of these words. Complementarians cannot agree (among themselves) what these words mean and imply.
- We don’t know for sure what is meant by the reference to Adam being created first. All sorts of suggestions have been made; including the very common-until-recently suggestion that women are inferior to men.
- We don’t know what is meant by the reference to Eve being deceived. That has become a difficult one for complementarians, as it is for anyone!

The challenge of working out what someone meant by their words – when all we have to go on is those words, with the original conversation partners now long dead – is considerable. Though we might like to be more confident, we can’t be, not without a significant loss of intellectual integrity.

St Augustine had some advice for people in his day who were making similarly over-confident claims about the words of Moses:

¹⁷ *Women, Sermons and the Bible*, 193.

When so many meanings, all of them acceptable as true, can be extracted from the words that Moses wrote, do you not see how foolish it is to make a bold assertion that one in particular is the one he had in mind? *Confessions* 12.25.

We don't even know for sure whether St Paul wrote 1 Timothy. For some years now, scholars have been of the opinion (almost to the point of scholarly consensus) that he didn't – with all sorts of good reasons for their opinion.¹⁸ Even those who are now arguing back that St Paul did write this letter, perhaps through a secretary or commissioned co-author, readily acknowledge they don't know this for sure. The best they can do is decide on the basis of what is most probable, in their opinion.¹⁹

There is a **fifth** reason why some people are reluctant to follow the example of other churches and dioceses in breaking the stained glass ceiling, and that is that they fear it will lead to other even scarier renovations. To give way on this issue, they believe, will make it more likely that people will give in on other possibly more serious issues of life and faith. It is the classic slippery slope argument.

You may have heard of the Gospel Coalition. I hadn't until recently. It was founded in 2005 by a couple of high profile evangelical statesmen, Don Carson, from the Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, and Tim Keller, the senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. It describes itself as 'a fellowship of evangelical churches in the Reformed tradition' committed to 'renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures.' A friend of mine pointed out that the largest number of hits to its web-site come from here; from Sydney. And so it is clearly very influential.

Another friend of mine put me onto a video (which I then put up on Facebook) with Don Carson, Tim Keller joined by another evangelical luminary, John Piper, the whole purpose of which was to answer the question of why the Gospel Coalition includes complementarianism in its statement of faith.

Their answers are quite revealing. They claimed that Christians who adopt egalitarianism appear inclined to adopt approaches to reading the Bible which 'loosen' its authority. They become, or are more likely to become, 'loose' in their understandings of Biblical authority. I hope I have represented them accurately.

Two things to note: *Firstly*, members of *Christians for Biblical Equality* (who are represented here) are unlikely to be happy with this apparent slur on their evangelical credentials. CBE, as I understand it, is a large and well-resourced network of evangelical Christians who simply come to different conclusions in their exegesis of the relevant texts – without any loosening of their commitment to

¹⁸ Doubts about Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles date back to the early 19th century when German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that various words and ideas used in these letters were at odds with those used in other of the letters ascribed to Paul. Over time, other scholars followed suit until the present where NT scholars largely accept that the letters were probably not written (or brought to their final form) by St Paul.

¹⁹ George T. Montague puts it this way: 'The disproportionate attention I have given to the defence of authenticity should not be taken as incontrovertible proof. The bottom line is that absolute certainty is not available on either side.' *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008, 23. Luke Timothy Johnson, also expresses appropriate epistemic humility: 'I don't think it is possible to *demonstrate* that the Pastoral letters are authentic, but I do think a legitimate case can be made to read them within the context of Paul's own lifetime and ministry.' *Letters to Paul's Delegates*, 26.

Biblical authority, and so I think Keller, Carson and Piper were not being completely honest or helpful in their comments.

But my *second* observation is that the Gospel Coalition does have some things to worry about. There are winds of change that are blowing – not just in the wider church, but in evangelicalism itself – as a result of which people are increasingly questioning the adequacy of ways of reading and understanding the Bible, which, in the case of us Protestants, go all the way back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. And it is these winds of change, this widespread questioning which has produced the Gospel Coalition and made it nervous.

I was reminded of what is increasingly coming to be seen as an inadequate Reformation hermeneutic in some correspondence I had with Mark Thompson – after our conversation over coffee. I asked him, in an e-mail, about what he thought was inferred (or implied) by the reference to Eve being deceived, and not Adam. His response is revealing. He said,

I take what St Paul says as the truth of what happened in the Garden, and make no other inference from it. This is what happened, and on this genuine historical event is part of the basis on which Paul makes his argument.

Mark has again been helpful to me. What is the issue here? It is the issue of whether we can take the Bible at face value (in 1 Timothy, in Genesis, and throughout) as straightforwardly true in what it says. Mark is a Biblical literalist, as was Martin Luther, as were the other Reformers, and that is what has come under threat ... this whole approach. It has been under threat for a whole lot of years, actually, but this threat appears to have come to a head in just the last few years – for evangelicals. Hence the Gospel Coalition!

Luther gave precedence to Scripture (understood in terms of its plain sense) over even the most sensible sounding science. The trouble is; the BIG trouble is: this way of reading the Bible (literalism) isn't doing so well these days, at least intellectually.

When it comes to the first 11 chapters of Genesis, within which the story of Adam and Eve is embedded, almost no detail lines up with contemporary scientific understandings. Not the age of the earth; not the presence of a solid firmament above the earth; nor its description of a gigantic flood; nor its location of the cradle of humankind in Mesopotamia; nor its table of nations as an accurate account of the spread of humans around the world – not even its description of Adam and Eve as our first parents.

Although geneticists do speak about an Adam – the common ancestor of all contemporary males – this Adam lived, not in Mesopotamia, but in Africa, between 120 and 340 thousand years ago. They have also identified an Eve, the maternal ancestor of all contemporary humans, who also lived in Africa, between 99 and 200 thousand years ago – probably not at the same time or place as Adam, and, of course, this Adam and this Eve were embedded within an evolutionary tree that reaches even further back.

This recently discovered information is occasioning a re-think amongst Christians, including evangelical Christians (who, in general, aren't questioning the science).²⁰

It has become increasingly obvious that older ways of reading the Bible, including literalism, are inadequate, and now need to be archived and replaced by approaches that honour the Scriptures for what they are, ancient documents, written from the vantage point of assumptions and beliefs, some of which were discarded even within the page of the Bible itself; others of which we've had to discard ... and have done, now happily.

We need – evangelicalism needs – a hermeneutic (a way of reading the Bible) that is comfortably open to new knowledge, and is not always on the back foot, trying to defend the indefensible.²¹ That is the task Moore Theological College ought to be taking on; or, if not Moore College, then talented young and not so young theologians within the Diocese.

And, let me say, in embracing this daunting and demanding task, there is indeed a steep and slippery slope; down which it is possible to slide; but it is, nevertheless, a slope that needs to be scaled; with all the skill and energy we can muster, as we work through to better and deeper understandings of our faith. And we cannot take with us on this perilous journey ruck-sacks filled with manifest falsehoods; or we will go sliding into theological oblivion; where we will be completely out of touch with the world we seek to influence for Christ.

I have one **final** suggestion as to why people are reluctant to allow the stained glass ceiling to be broken, and that is because, whether we like it or not, we are all influenced by underlying and often unconscious instincts and impulses; currents that run below the surface of all of our experiences – some of them no doubt going back to our evolutionary past. There are deeper than intellectual issues involved here.

There is, indeed, a battle of the sexes. There is misogyny. There is the fragile male ego. My friend Paul is right that men often don't like women being in charge of them – as Julia Gillard found. And there are broader gender issues – in itself a scary can of worms that is now being opened, to the

²⁰ A book very much worth getting your hands on, if you are interested, is Matthew Barrett, Ardel B. Caneday (eds.) *Four Views On The Historical Adam*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. The book is written by four evangelicals, only one of which questions contemporary scientific conclusions with respect to the evolution of humankind; and even that person supplies no alternative. The first author, Denis O. Lamoureux, believes that no such person as Adam (or Eve), as described in Genesis, existed. They are mythical figures.

²¹ German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann differentiated between two types of hermeneutic. The first, a 'hermeneutics from above', located the authority of the Bible in God's direct communication with humans through the Scriptures, understood to be God's written Word. The authority of the Bible lies in the God who speaks. This was the view of another great German theologian, Karl Barth. A 'hermeneutic from below', by contrast, highlights the humanity of the Scriptures, viewing them as time and bound testimonies of faith. Understood in this way, one needs to understand and then appropriate what one finds in Scripture, taking account of advances in understanding that are likely to impact one's theologizing. Another helpful guide in this important process is the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). For Ricoeur, appropriation is the process of making one's own what is initially alien. It was, for him, the final stage of a three part hermeneutical process; which moved through stages of first naïve encounter, through critical engagement and on to a second naïveté where the ancient text is encountered again in terms of what we learn from it.

alarm mainly of men. We would love a simpler world, in which men were men, and women were women.

But once again, the reality is more complicated. Men and women are different – no-one wants to deny that, but what some do deny and want to air-brush out of reality is that there is incredible variety along what is now referred to as the gender spectrum; so much so that people cannot be neatly squeezed into just two expressions of humankind; male and female; with men (as a gender) being the ones who are ‘designed to lead’ and females (as a gender) being at their most fulfilled when they can willingly submit to their husbands’ loving guidance.

The world just isn’t that simple. The so-called ‘order of creation’ is a lot more complex and varied than that, and that takes some getting used to; for Christians certainly, but for our society in general.

In the same way that we Christians have got to do some pretty hard thinking on how our evolutionary past impacts on some of the big themes of traditional theology, we likewise need to have a long hard think, and lots of conversations about what are the implications for ethics and theology of what we are now learning about gender and genetics.

We can get behind the barricades and fight; and resist; as the Gospel Coalition is endeavouring to do. There is a lot at stake; that is for sure, especially for us men. Those underwater currents are certainly swirling around for us.

Let me finish this short last point by quoting from the final few pages of a massive and impressive historical study by historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, entitled *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. MacCulloch notes the obvious and pervasive presence of fear amongst contemporary religionists. In his words:

Throughout the world at the present day, the most easily heard tone of religion (not just Christianity) is of a generally angry conservatism.

MacCulloch tentatively suggests a reason for the fear:

I would hazard that the anger centres on a profound shift in gender roles which have traditionally been given religious significance and validated by religious traditions. It embodies the hurt of heterosexual men at cultural shifts which have generally threatened to marginalize them and deprive them of dignity, hegemony or even much usefulness – not merely heterosexual men already in positions of leadership, but those who in traditional cultural systems would expect to inherit leadership.’²²

Clearly, there are deeper issues involved here.

A suggested way forward

Since being asked to do this talk, I have gone back to this issue which I hadn’t thought about in any depth for a long time. And I tried, as best I could, given constraints of time, to again wade through some of the literature (and it’s massive). The last time I did this was way back in 1985 or 86, when I

²² D. A. MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, London: Allen Lane, 2009, 990.

was arguing against the priesting of women up in the Diocese of Armidale – when I was a young ardent, and, no doubt, somewhat obnoxious recent Moore College graduate.

But what has struck me this time is how evenly poised is the debate between complementarians and egalitarians. I think the egalitarians have slightly the better case, but it is not *that decisive* a difference. To go back to an earlier point, we can't be sure whether the author of 1 Timothy (whether St Paul or not) was reasserting some form of patriarchy; when the rest of the NT is quite ambiguous. We are not sure.

Which way do you go – with all these competing possibilities; especially in a world where we do now know that women are not more gullible than men, and that they do have the necessary skills and talents (and passion and calling) to make fine preachers and leaders; where most Christian marriages are happily egalitarian (in practice, if not always in theory); and where complementarians struggle to supply a credible (even to themselves) rationale for doing what they believe Scripture is telling them to do.

What should we do in such a conflicted situation? Is there any way to break this frustrating impasse between complementarians and egalitarians? I think there is. We can simply acknowledge what seems so obvious when you go back and read the Scriptures, and that is that they are dynamic. There is movement within them and through them; and even differences of opinion between their various books. Moreover, the Biblical writers did assume and believe things about the world (about Adam and Eve and Noah, for example, and about the origin of death) which we now quite reasonably think differently about.

We are not going to solve our disputes by simply quoting Scripture at each other.

What we can do is to say, even if all of the Biblical writers did assume patriarchy, while modifying and fine tuning it, we are not required to retain it – in any form. In our setting, it isn't necessary. It isn't helpful. It probably doesn't contribute to human flourishing. And it probably is needlessly disrespectful to our amazingly talented sisters!

And so I, for one, vote for the smashing of the stained glass ceiling. It probably shouldn't have been put up in the first place, and I am sure we can happily do without it. This renovation is likely to be rewarding for any and all who take the risk.

Keith Mascord

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