Moving Forward, Being Prepared, Giving Reasons

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Have you ever noticed how often Scripture asks us to be prepared, to trim our lamps, to be ready to offer a reason for our hope? Being prepared with an answer for why we hope for a church where believers serve based on their character and giftedness, rather than their gender, is an important way we “move forward” as egalitarians. We must be ready to give reasons for our hope because Scripture calls us to not only believe in the good news of Christ but to also, in gentleness and respect, share our hope with others. Sometimes our egalitarian witness can include asking a question; nominating a gifted woman for a leadership position; recommending a book, topic, or speaker; or using stories and analogies that help us interpret biblical texts more accurately.

Analogies can be powerful tools that bring clarity to complex issues. Educators suggest that metaphors and analogies enable individuals to grasp quickly the essential elements of logic in what are otherwise complicated discussions. Perhaps this is one reason Jesus used metaphors and analogies when explaining spiritual realities. Because the biblical interpretation is often complex, it can be helpful to use analogies to grasp the meaning of passages such as 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Consider the following example.

When climbing a steep rock, or when reading a confusing passage in Scripture, the temptation is to hug the rock too closely—to rely upon the “clearest reading” of the English text. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is a classic example. It is a very steep rock—it is a difficult text to interpret not only because Paul suggests that women are saved through childbearing (v. 15), but also because Paul uses a strange Greek word, found only once in the Bible—authentein (v. 12). The passage, by virtue of its complexity, demands more of us, just as a skilled climber recognizes that climbing a steep incline requires a counter intuitive measure: despite the laws of gravity, the safest path upward is not to hug the rock but to lean away from it. In order for us gain a universal application from a difficult text like 1 Timothy 2:11-15, we must lean away from the plain reading of the passage in order to gain perspective through a historical, cultural, and linguistic analysis, and by allowing what is clear in Scripture to shed meaning on what is unclear.

To gain balance and perspective in understanding 1 Timothy 2:11-15, we lean back and consider how other writers from the first century used authentein. The answer is very helpful. First century writers nearly always used authentein for “authority” that was domineering, misappropriated, or usurped. It can also mean to behave in violent ways or to kill. That is why the Vulgate, the Geneva Bible, the King James Version, and others translations of Scripture translate authentein as “domineering,” or “usurping authority.” It is also helpful to lean back and learn that Ephesus was a city known for its worship of the fertility goddess Artemis, who promised women safety in childbearing. Unlike most goddesses, Artemis did not have a male partner, and this background helps explain why women affiliated with Artemis might have usurped authority to promote myths and genealogies that are contrary to Scripture. Paul opposes their efforts by using the unusual Greek word authentein.

As we continue to “lean back” and study the situation at Ephesus further, we observe that Priscilla and Aquila built a church in their home in Ephesus, where they instructed Apollos (1 Cor. 16:19). Significantly, Priscilla is referenced ahead of her husband in teaching one of the most gifted speakers mentioned in the New Testament—Apollos. She instructed him in the very place—Ephesus—where Paul asks women not to usurp authority over men. Clearly, the type of leadership Priscilla exercised is one that was godly and not domineering. Importantly, she did not promote myths and genealogies but explained the way of God more adequately! The universal principle of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is not to exclude women (like Priscilla) from teaching, but to exclude false teachers who usurp authority.

As we give answers for our hope, we may need to explain that to give Scripture its fullest authority in our lives means we resist the “clearest reading of the text” when doing so places Scripture at odds with itself, as when reading 1 Timothy 2:11-15 at face value. Hugging the rock and clinging to a plain reading of the passage may feel safe, but it places Paul in conflict with himself! It is the surest path not to the top of the mountain of biblical clarity, but to the bottom.