



# NT Wright



## Why I changed my mind about female church leadership

Q&A by Justin Brierley

**N**ew Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright is one of the most influential voices in biblical studies today. He sat down with Justin Brierley to explain why he changed his mind about the ordination of women and how he interprets passages in Scripture that are often used to oppose female church leadership.

**Q** A few decades ago, the Church of England began to ordain women. It's only more recently that women have been ordained as bishops. As an Anglican, how has your own thinking changed on the issues over the years?

**A** I grew up in a church where clergy were male and the most that a woman could do was to be a deaconess, which was like a deacon but probably not actually presiding at services (except occasionally at rural churches when there wasn't a vicar around). One of my aunts was actually an Anglican nun, very active in the church and a deeply prayerful person of great personal spiritual leadership. People used to go to her for counsel. So I had been used to women taking quite an interesting role rather than just [being] passive – but not being ordained.

I started thinking about it more seriously when we were in Canada in the early 80s as I was in Montreal and they had just decided they were going to ordain women. That was quite a challenge for me, and forced me to go back and look at various Bible passages. I came out with a view that, though I couldn't necessarily explain all the detail of all the verses that are sometimes quoted against, there was a very strong groundswell of scriptural affirmation in favour. It wasn't just that I had seen women doing it and realised it was ok (though there may have been a bit of that softening me up and making me ready for the fresh scriptural awareness). Of course, I'm very much aware of debates continuing.

**Q** What about those in the Anglican church who don't find it possible to work in unity because of this?

**A** When I was Bishop of Durham there was a group of clergy who, because I was going to ordain women, could not regard me as *their* bishop. They were in what we call 'a different integrity'. How you can have two 'integrities' is still

quite tricky. But I've always believed that this isn't something you should divide the church over. As with some other contentious issues, the aim should be to live in such a way that doesn't make demands on one another's conscience but may make demands on one another's charity. It isn't always easy, and it doesn't always work the way you'd like.

**Q** How does Scripture affirm the role of women in preaching and teaching?

**A** I would begin with the resurrection stories of Jesus in the first light of Easter day. Without the resurrection everything falls apart, there is no Christianity. Within that culture, the idea that the prime witnesses to the most important event in the whole story would be women in tears is so counterintuitive that, as a historian, I have to say that nobody would ever make up that story.

Women – Mary Magdalene and the others – were the first people to see Jesus and the first people to be told to tell others that He was alive again. All Christian ministry flows from the announcement that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now the Lord of the world. This is a cultural revolution. Jesus had up till then chosen twelve men, who all let Him down in various ways. He now transforms that – this is part of the newness of new creation – by saying 'this extraordinary, explosive message is so subversive that the best people to take it are strange women whom no one is going to believe.' And indeed the disciples themselves don't. But they were telling the truth.

We need to inhabit that way of looking at that story and ask 'Was this just a flash in the pan?' The answer is 'Absolutely not!'

Read Romans 16 – it's explosive. Paul greets all these church leaders in Rome, many of whom are women who are church leaders in their own right. One of them is an apostle – Junia. There's been a huge attempt to make out this is *Junias* (a man) but the scholarship is quite clear: this is a female name. She is an apostle. For Paul that means somebody who has seen the risen Jesus and is thereby commissioned to be an authorised representative.

And here's the crunch – the first woman mentioned in Romans 16 is the bearer of the letter to Rome. Now if you are Paul, and you know in your bones that you've just written





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a letter that is the most explosive piece of theological writing you can imagine, who are you going to give it to, to take it to read under Caesar’s nose in Rome? Presumably some strong man? No, a deacon woman of the church in Cenchrea, who we assume is an independent businesswoman – Phoebe. If you sent a letter with someone, then the chances are they would be the one to read it out. Also, they might well be the one to explain it to people (and faced with Romans we’d all have a thousand questions!). So the probability is that the first person to expound Paul’s letter to the Romans was a woman. Get used to it, guys.

This is explosive but it’s the sort of thing that happens when new creation happens. I want to ask what the forces are in our culture today (particularly in America) that want to row back from that by fastening on one or two verses from elsewhere. Because that is a highly selective reading of Scripture.

**Q Let’s look at one of the verses often quoted. Can you explain 1 Timothy 2:11-12, ‘A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man...’?**

**A** These verses in 1 Timothy don’t necessarily imply what we might think. I would translate verse 11, ‘They must study in peace, in full submission to God’. The word *manthaneto* – let her learn or study – is the same root from which we get *mathetes*, disciple. *Hesukia* – meaning peace and quiet – is what you have (hopefully!) if you’re a student or scholar. You have the leisure to study in peace.

It looks to me as though what’s being said in 1 Timothy here is similar to what we find in Luke 10. Jesus is in the home of Mary and Martha, and Mary (shock, horror) is not in the back room, where the women should be, doing the cooking. She is in the front room, sitting with the male disciples, learning with them. Stating that ‘[women] should learn’ at all was quite radical in that culture.

**Q So what about 1 Timothy 2:12 which seems to lay down a law about women preaching and teaching?**

**A** The crucial thing is the possibility that 1 Timothy is written to the context of Ephesus. What we know about Ephesus in the first century is that there was a great temple to Diana (or Artemis, in Greek). The temple of Artemis was one of the wonders of the world, and its cult was run by women: it was a female-only cult. Various people have argued (and this isn’t my idea, but I think it has some mileage) that what Paul is opposing is the idea that religion was basically a female thing in Ephesus. The Artemis priestesses didn’t allow men a look-in, and maybe some of the local Christians were suggesting that this should apply to their groups as well.

The key Greek word in the middle, *authentain* (‘to usurp’ or ‘assume’) is a very strange word which, if you look it up in the dictionary, has about twelve different meanings, one of which is actually ‘to murder’. Now we don’t know exactly what the context is, but verse 12 would then be read as a rebuke to the Artemis-like female-only worship. The point would be that

women should not ‘usurp’ or try to ‘take over’ authority from men. If so, then the passage is a call to balance and equality, not a command that the men should be in charge.

**Q There are lots of people who disagree with you, of course...**

**A** Of course, and everything I’ve said could be contested, and has been contested. My question is: why have some people taken those few verses and made an entire, very fierce, church policy out of it, particularly in America? What’s going on in the culture to make people do that, when they miss out so many other things in the New Testament?

There are many other passages in the New Testament where the apostleship and teaching role of women is affirmed. Likewise, how many times do we have teaching about riches and poverty in the New Testament? How many times do we have teaching about generosity to the poor? Many people who fixate on a few verses in 1 Timothy don’t actually seem to bother about all those other things. That’s the real problem.

Adapted from an interview on the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast

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### Justin Brierley

Justin Brierley is theology and apologetics editor for Premier and the author of *Unbelievable? Why, after ten years of talking with atheists I’m still a Christian* (SPCK).

