

**Wed 27 February 2013**



**A review of John Dickson *Hearing Her Voice: A Case for Women Giving Sermons*, Kindle 2012.**

It can be frustrating and difficult to listen to a conversation between a group of insiders when you are a relative outsider.

I remember dinner table conversations in a community house I once lived in where the majority of people had medical or health training and professional experience. I was generally interested in their conversations but was unfamiliar with medical conditions (my very rudimentary Latin sometimes helped me guess what was being discussed), nor how hospitals worked. I listened to many conversations before I realised that the 'numb' often referred to was not the lack of sensation experienced by a patient but actually the acronym 'NUM' short for Nursing–Unit–Manager.

John Dickson's ebook *Hearing Her Voice: A Case for Women Giving Sermons* and the discussion it has generated on blogs and other social media during the last few weeks is a debate peculiar to those inhabiting conservative and evangelical spheres of the church (especially reformed North Americans, Sydney Anglicans and Southern Baptists).

The technical, insider language and certain presumptions about 'how church works' reflect the intended audience and may appear quaint (or worse) to those who already affirm women preaching – and leading – in the church (or the diocese!).

Why should relative outsiders be interested in this conversation among conservative insiders? Why should Christians who already affirm teaching and leadership roles for women bother with Dickson's book?

What Dickson does is challenge Christians to faithfully perform the Scriptures. The concern for faithfulness transcends the tired, old categories of conservative or progressive; evangelical or liberal. How do we integrate what we believe (Scripture, doctrine) with what we do (practice, ethics)? The relationship has traditionally been understood as flowing primarily in one direction: what Christians believe shapes what Christians do.

Dickson's book provocatively suggests that his conservative colleagues have reversed the order in the instance of forbidding women from preaching sermons. His argument, in a nutshell, is about how Christians should faithfully perform a hotly contested portion of Scripture.

Dickson disputes the conservative claim that Paul's prohibition against women teaching men in 1 Timothy 2:12 (Scripture, doctrine) governs their prohibition against contemporary preaching by women (practice, ethics). On this particular issue, Dickson contends,

conservative interpretation has operated in reverse: that the contemporary conservative practice of not allowing women to preach sermons has unduly shaped the interpretation (what some call the 'plain reading') of 1 Timothy 2:12 (Scripture, doctrine).

Dickson, the historian, argues that teaching means preserving and laying down the traditions handed down by the apostles (Loc 60, 67 of 1161, another detailed definition occurs Loc 293). The contemporary sermon, in his view, is more akin to exhorting and prophesying – speaking activities women are encouraged to perform by Paul.

Conservative Christians are not the only ones who have allowed their practice to shape their belief. More commonly the counter-accusation is made: that more liberal or progressive Christians have allowed culture and context to unduly influence the interpretation of Scripture and shape belief!

It is little wonder that Dickson's small book (now referred to as an 'E-pamph' across social media!) has stirred the hornet's nest.\* Dickson contends instead of giving the term [teaching] the broadest possible meaning and excluding women from offering any extended speech in church, we should be exploring how teaching differs from prophesying and exhorting and then, from that conclusion, shape our contemporary practice (Loc 240). If Christians are to be faithful in performing the Scripture then the goal must be their actual practice ('lived experience') rather than just the 'idea of practice' (something that academics and scholars easily retreat into).

Unfortunately, many of the critiques of Dickson's book fall into this second category by focussing on the 'idea of teaching' rather than examining the actual 'practice of teaching' in the historical setting of the Pastoral Epistles. Like the Scriptures themselves, good theology must be 'relevatory' not just 'illuminating' in nature. There is a critical role for vision, discernment, imagination and worship in good theology alongside the traditional roles of exegesis and grammar, hermeneutics and history.

While Dickson's book aims at the former, too much of the ensuing debate has remained stuck in the latter. Dickson's 'very modest argument' is deliberately restricted to 'historical and exegetical considerations' (Loc 348). Such arguments assume that as contemporary Christians get the interpretation of Scripture right, then faithful performance will follow naturally. It is likely that the relationship between Christian believing and Christian living is more nuanced than has been admitted in the debate surrounding *Hearing Her Voice* so far.

Some critiques have articulated a more relational understanding of teaching than is explicit in Dickson's account. Authoritative teachers without faithful pupils (disciples) is like the West Wing TV show definition of a leader without followers: a lonely guy going for a walk!

There are two implications of making faithful performance intrinsic to the authoritative teaching Paul has on view in 1 Timothy 2:12. First, Dickson's 'technical' definition of teaching cannot function as the 'last word' on its interpretation in 1 Timothy 2 (to be fair, Dickson never claims that it is).

Second – which forms the focus of this review – is that Christian faithfulness is essentially relational. Christians perform the Scriptures when they are faithful to Jesus Christ, listening to his voice, and those authoritative teachers who preach, explain, exhort, testify, encourage and yes – even prophesy – to his life, death and resurrection.

*\* on 21st February 2013 the board of Women's Katoomba Convention (WKC) withdrew its invitation to Dr John Dickson to speak at its annual convention due to "concern that the debate surrounding Dr Dickson's latest publication, 'Hearing Her Voice' would inevitably*

*politicise this year's convention amongst some of our friends". The full statement can be read on the [KCC website](#)*

By [Geoff Broughton](#)

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## Comments

Interesting issue Geoff.

But what do you make of Dickson's interpretation of "teaching". Is he right?

*Made by Jeremy Halcrow on Wed 27 February 2013*

Jeremy, it's a very technical definition that I am only partially qualified to weigh into. It seems more correct to say that "teaching" in 1 Tim 2 is more along the lines of what Dickson suggests than simply equating with a contemporary sermon. Without the relational dimension, however, it also appears less-than-satisfying

*Made by Geoff Broughton on Wed 27 February 2013*

That's a refreshing read and a much needed focus shift for the many reviews of Johns e-pamph ;)

Allowing the scriptures to shape our practice is a solid reminder in the midst of a discussion on this issue. (Amongst the other very good things said) Thanks Geoff.

*Made by Bruce Stanley on Wed 27 February 2013*

Dear Geoff - I am heartened by your review of Dr Dickson's generous and sane publication.

Many thanks, +Stuart

*Made by 9218 on Thu 28 February 2013*