

Women in Ministry – A New Testament Perspective

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There is a real need to re-examine our faith from time to time. The Apostle Paul recognized the importance of such careful thinking in writing to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves." (2 Corinthians 13:5). Surely this is wise counsel for Christians to follow, particularly in times of uncertainty or confusion. We all need to take a hard look at our views, searching the Scriptures for divine guidance and earnestly seeking the mind of Christ.

The place of women in ministry is one such issue which has come to the fore in recent days. People hold very definite views on the subject, and often do not take kindly to someone who takes the opposite position. This produces a certain tension in the body of Christ. On the one hand, truth is important, and must be highly prized and valued. On the other hand, we must endeavour "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Clearly this is not always easy, particularly when it comes to areas where we have strong convictions. Then it is difficult to be loyal to the truth as we understand it, and yet retain an attitude of love and charity toward our Christian brothers and sisters who differ from us. And yet we are called to do both. We all need to pray for humility and grace to find the right path here. The old adage has much to commend it: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Where do we go for guidance on this thorny matter? At this point we should remember the purpose for which the Scriptures were given: "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). Bible study is not just for scholars, but for the development of Christian life and character. This is particularly clear in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." While "the sacred writings" undoubtedly referred to the Old Testament, the Christian church has also accepted the New Testament as part of the Bible; indeed as Baptists we have repeatedly declared that the New Testament was our rule of faith and practice. It will be helpful for us to look at the New Testament for guidance on this subject.

Before looking at problem passages, it will be useful to summarize:

I. Some New Testament Teaching on the Position of Women

1. Jesus related well to women. He treated them with respect, taught them, and appeared first to them after his resurrection. Women ministered to him and the apostles (Luke 8:1-3). After surveying the gospels, we are left with the clear impression that, to Jesus, the intrinsic value of women as persons is just as great as that of men, an idea found nowhere in, and in some ways alien to, the Jewish thought of the time ... this attitude led to radical differences in the way that Jesus treated women, and also in the way that he expected his followers to treat women." (1)
2. Paul was not antagonistic to women, but in fact regarded them as co-workers in the cause of Christ. He mentions at least nine women in his long list of colleagues and partners in Romans 16.
3. Paul states the spiritual equality of men and women in Galatians 3:28. He insists that for those who are united to Christ there is "neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The old barriers that separated people have been broken down in Christ. This is a clear and unmistakable principle which must not be lost sight of. In accordance

with one of the great insights of the Protestant Reformation, the obscure passages of Scripture are to be interpreted in the light of the plain ones. In other words, as Professor F.F. Bruce has said, "Paul states the basic principle here; if restrictions on it are found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, as in 1 Corinthians 14:34 or 1 Timothy 2:11 f., they are to be understood in relation to Galatians 3:28, and not vice versa." (2)

4. A number of women are mentioned who functioned as prophets. Acts 21:9, 10 is particularly interesting, for it speaks both of Agabus as a "prophet" and notes that Philip the evangelist had "four unmarried daughters, who prophesied." This pattern of both men and women prophesying is in line with the Old Testament prophecy found in Joel 2:28-32. Peter quotes Joel on the day of Pentecost, and declares the prophet's message to be fulfilled in the Christian era: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ..., and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

5. Several women are prominent in the establishment of churches. One thinks immediately of Lydia, the business woman from the city of Thyatira, who was instrumental in the foundation of the church in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15). Even more active in church planting was Priscilla, who is mentioned with her husband in connection with the founding of the church in Corinth (Acts 18:1-7). Indeed, this couple provided hospitality to a church which met in their house (1 Corinthians 16:19).

6. A number of women are singled out by Paul as conspicuous workers. Paul addresses two women in Philippi rather directly, for they are disagreeing in such a way as to affect the peace and stability of the church: "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord." Despite his word of caution, he recognizes their very real partnership, "for they have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers" (Philippians 4:2-3). Note also that Phoebe is described as a "deacon" in Romans 16:1, using the same word which is used to describe church officers in 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

We have seen a surprising openness in the New Testament towards women in the first century. Now we must ask, What does the New Testament teach us about leaders? For the sake of brevity, a number of points can be outlined.

II .Leaders in the New Testament Church

1. There is a general recognition of the importance of leaders in the New Testament, including local church officers (Ephesians 4:7-12; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5}.They are referred to by many names ,but there is a strong emphasis upon their function as the servants of God's people (Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:7; 4:7,11; 1 Corinthians 3:9).

2. Flexibility and diversity are the characteristic features of New Testament leadership in the church. Note the passages on spiritual gifts: Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28-31; Ephesians 4:7-12.

3. A plurality of leaders is the norm (Philippians 1:1; Acts 14:23).

4. The pattern of leadership is "corporate, collegial, and personal"; in other words, it is a "team ministry". The first general church council in Jerusalem beautifully illustrates this pattern of shared ministry (Acts 15).

5. High moral and spiritual qualifications are laid down for these leaders (1Timothy 3:1-13; Titus

1:6-9). People inside and outside the church must respect church leaders if they are to have any influence on the community for Christ and his cause. The same general characteristics are demanded of deacons as of bishops/elders (pastors): personal maturity, emotional stability, theological fidelity, administrative ability, and general credibility. An additional requirement for pastoral leadership is the ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9).

6. All models of leadership involve servanthood, not domination (1 Peter 5: 2-3). This was pre-eminently true of the ministry of Jesus, who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). Jesus modeled the servant role clearly and decisively (Luke 22:27; John 13:1-17). He insisted that we are to follow in his train.

7. Women as well as men served the early church in leadership roles (Romans 16:1; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; Philippians 4:2-3).

8. Every Christian has a spiritual gift, and is expected to use it (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

9. All spiritual gifts are intended for the building up of the church, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:12).

10. Pastors are to function as equippers (Ephesians 4:11-13), teachers (1 Timothy 3:2), and shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-5; John 21:15-17).

11. The deacons are to function as helpers and models of Christlike living and service (1 Timothy 3:8-13; cf. Acts 6:1-6). There are far more references to serving than there are to the office "servant" (deacon). God is more interested in getting the job done than in the titles of the leaders!

12. All Christian leaders need the support and prayers of God's people if they are to carry out their responsibilities properly (1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Ephesians 6:19-20); Colossians 4:3-4; Hebrews 13:17-18). Every leader is under the "great Shepherd of the sheep", and has a "charge" to keep (Hebrews 13:20; 2 Timothy 4:1-5).

III. A Look at Problem Passages

Now that we have looked briefly at the New Testament's general approach toward women and Christian ministry in general, it is only fair to ask, what do we make of those passages which seem to be hostile to women in ministry? In this connection, I want to turn to 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, which are probably the most frequently debated passages on this subject. Without doubt, these two passages have often been used to reject the notion of women in ministry out of hand. The verses are quoted authoritatively, and the matter is assumed to be settled without further discussion or debate. Further study, however, makes this assumption questionable. To begin with, it seems to run counter to the general teaching of the New Testament which we have attempted to outline briefly. It also violates the basic principle of interpretation which the Protestant Reformers stressed: the insistence that the obscure passages of the Bible should always be interpreted in the light of its plain teaching. And we have seen that the New Testament plainly teaches us the place of women in planting churches, prophesying, and serving as co-workers in the cause of Christ.

At this point we must all beware of assuming we know what a passage means before we have made an honest study of the context. This is nowhere more true than in 1 Timothy 2: 11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-36. A recent study of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 makes a careful attempt to explore the social context (3). Taking the passage with the utmost seriousness, Alan Padgett argues very

convincingly that Paul was dealing with a special situation in Ephesus, where wealthy women who had recently become Christians were attaching themselves to false teachers, who were quite prepared to exploit them for financial gain. These women were not well grounded in their faith, and needed to be disciplined themselves before they could presume to teach others. But this lack they failed to recognize, and so they were becoming a real problem to the Ephesian church. Faced with this situation, Paul tells Timothy that these women have to have their authority limited: "They must not cause anger and argument with the men in church meetings. They should submit to their proper teachers (i.e., Timothy) and must be at peace while they are being instructed in the faith. They should not have authority over men, even though they may expect it, given their social status. Finally, like Eve, they have listened to the snake. If they turn from false teachings against marriage and take up their role in creation as child-bearers (like Eve and Mary whose seed will save them and all humanity), then -- always remaining in faith, love, and holiness -- they will be saved." (4) Interpreted in this way, there is nothing in these verses "to indicate that women were not leaders in the early church, nor anything that would limit their role in the church today." (5) The background of this difficult passage sheds a flood of light on the situation of the local church in Ephesus, and illuminates Paul's handling of a burning issue which was disturbing the peace and tranquility of that church.

The other passage that calls for examination is 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Several observations need to be made about this passage. First, we must face the fact that Paul has already noted that women can pray and prophesy in church (1 Corinthians 11:5, 13). Second, the Corinthian Christians, despite their many spiritual gifts, were faced with many problems, which Paul patiently helps them to sort out. Third, Corinth was one of the most corrupt, debauched cities of the ancient world. Everyone knew what a "Corinthian girl" meant. In the old city of Corinth there had been a thousand "sacred prostitutes" who worked out of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The same spirit pervaded the new city which had been rebuilt in 44 B.C. Under such circumstances, Christian women had to be extremely careful lest they convey the wrong message. Fourth, this is a very, very difficult passage, on which many capable commentators have come to different conclusions. Several solutions have been suggested, however, which do justice to biblical authority and at the same time take into consideration the cultural background. (4)

Plainly the church is facing a crisis. It seems likely that a group of assertive, insensitive women had arisen in Corinth. They were not observing the normal social conventions, and were in danger of giving the church a bad name. Once again Paul acts to protect the cause of Christ and to safeguard the credibility of the local church. He insists on the principles of modesty and good taste, principles which still apply whenever God's people gather to worship Him. While the particular cultural setting will vary from country to country and from one time to another, Christian witness will always require sensitivity to the culture and a concern for doing all things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). Once again there is nothing in this passage which forbids the role of women in Christian leadership; the prohibition stated makes perfect sense against the disorderly conduct of the Corinthian church in general and certain unruly charismatic women in particular. The Lord Jesus is honoured when his people live in a responsible way both in the church and in the community. Nothing must be allowed to hinder the spread of the gospel. We must conduct ourselves, wherever we are, with sensitivity and good taste.

IV. Conclusion

There is nothing in the New Testament which categorically forbids the leadership of women. While there are several difficult passages which have been used rather thoughtlessly to oppose the role of women (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:12-14), these are capable of perfectly reasonable explanations when their contexts are taken seriously. It is no longer possible to debate this matter on the grounds of biblical authority; it is a matter of biblical interpretation. When due weight has been given to the cultural background, the difficult passages make sense and show Paul acting responsibly as a pastor to address real issues which concerned the peace and stability of either the Corinthian or the Ephesian church. (6) Women, like men, are summoned by Christ to use whatever gifts they have to serve the Lord and His people.

Endnotes

- (1) Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible: An Overview of All Crucial Passages on Women's Roles*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1983), p. 46. See also Evelyn and Frank Stagg, *Women in the World of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).
- (2) F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Commentary on the Greek Testament. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 190.
- (3) Alan Padgett, "Wealthy Women at Ephesus: I Timothy 2:8-15 in Social Context," *Interpretation*, Vol. XLI, No. 1, January 1987, pp. 19-31.
- (4) Padgett, p. 30. For a helpful survey of recent evangelical scholarship see Alvera Mickelsen, ed., *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986), where twenty-six scholars share their views on this important subject.
- (5) Padgett, p. 30. For a helpful, more comprehensive study see Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985). Among other things, he discusses women converts, apostles, prophets, teachers, helpers, and administrators. He concludes: "The lofty ideals for male/female integration among Christians as enunciated in the Church's inaugural statements and in its teaching were practiced in the life of the church. The evidence indicates that women participated in roles of leadership at the highest levels. Such continuity between faith and practice was achieved against pressures to conform to patriarchal norms in ambient culture" (p. 206).
- (6) Roger L. Omanson, "The Role of Women in the New Testament Church," *Review and Expositor*, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 1, Winter, 1986, pp. 15-25, arrives at essentially the same conclusions as does the present writer. This whole issue is devoted to "Women in Ministry", and is worthy of careful study as an up-to-date account of Southern Baptist thinking on the subject.

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