

The Place of Women in Ministry

Dr. Harold L. Mitton

The place of women in ministry continues to be debated in many parts of the Christian church today. There is no lack of arguments for and against. Apparently, it never occurs to many people to regard a woman as a Christian person uniquely gifted by the Spirit of God for the good of the whole body of Christ. Consequently all manner of obstacles are placed in the way of women exercising leadership in the church. This, it seems to me, is regrettable. Is it not conceivable that God in His sovereign freedom calls whom He will to serve Him? There are women of proven gifts who humbly believe that He has laid His hand upon them. It is primarily on this high ground, and not simply on that of the equality of the sexes, that the matter should be settled. Naturally, as in the case of men, the church has a duty to scrutinize the claim, since entrance into the ministry is too vital a matter to be decided by the individual alone, whether man or woman.

The issue is an important one. At the very time when women have been forging ahead in secular society as teachers, doctors, lawyers, technicians, professors, and so on, the church appears to cling to a patriarchal system or structure which places the church's leadership firmly in masculine hands.

The prohibition of women in ministry, so strongly advocated by some, does not find consistent support in Holy Scripture. To be sure, there is much which appears to be contradictory, or at least obscure. Further, as with other issues, so much depends on one's hermeneutic. If, for instance, one holds to "proof-texting", the habit of lifting out a portion of Scripture, a sentence, or even a phrase, to prove a previously determined point of view, it is possible to "prove" almost anything. It would appear incontrovertible that, taken the full sweep of the biblical revelation, Scriptures teach the universal priesthood of all believers - male and female - as a part of the ministry of the Spirit of God in the world.

Whenever the prophets of the Old Testament are mentioned or studied, the chances are very good that one will be omitted. Her name is Huldah. She served the Lord during the reign of King Josiah, and when the King sought the counsel of the Lord he turned not to Jeremiah, a contemporary prophet, but to Huldah, a prophetess (II Kings 22:13-15). Another notable prophetess in the Old Testament was Deborah (Judges 4:6-9). Both Huldah and Deborah were women under divine call, affirmed, and placed by God in significant leadership roles accepted by God's people.

There were women prophets in the New Testament also. When the infant Jesus was brought to Jerusalem in dedication to the Lord, there were two people in the temple who declared that this child would grow up to be the giver of salvation for both Jew and Gentile. One of those persons was a prophetess named Anna, faithful and devout; upon seeing Jesus "she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38).

In the early Christian church there is another reference to women prophets. At the close of his third missionary journey, as Paul made his way to Jerusalem, he and Luke stopped at the house of Philip, the evangelist, who was one of the seven. According to Luke, Philip had four single daughters, "who prophesied" (Acts 21:9). To have women called of God to preach, to have women serving as proclaimers of the Word, to have women accepted as preachers - all of this is not something unprecedented or contrary to the Word of God. It did occur in the Old Testament and in the New Testament without rebuke or condemnation.

There are three more women in the New Testament who need to be mentioned for very special reasons. One is Priscilla who, with her husband Aquila, was well known throughout the early Christian church. When Paul came to Corinth, he lived with them and worked with them because all three were tent makers. When Paul left Corinth and went to Ephesus, he took Priscilla and Aquila with him. They stayed in Ephesus when Paul left. During their time in Ephesus, Apollos came to the city. Although eloquent, well-versed in the Scriptures, and fervent in spirit, his knowledge was limited, and "when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). It is highly significant that both Priscilla and Aquila are named as instructing and illuminating Apollos. There can be no question that here is a woman engaged in a teaching ministry, and she is teaching a man!

The next person to notice is a woman by the name of Dorcas. Her reputation as a person of good works and of merciful spirit was widespread. It is very interesting to observe the Scriptural description of Dorcas: "now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas" (Acts 9:36). Most people seeing or thinking about the word "disciple" usually think "male". We need to be reminded that "disciple" is an inclusive term or title and refers to all women or men seeking to follow God's will and purpose for their lives.

Phoebe is the final person to be considered here. Paul concludes his letter to the church of Rome with a whole list of personal greetings. It begins "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae ..." (Romans 16: 1-2). There is a considerable difference of opinion about the meaning of the Greek word translated here as "deaconess". The opinions range from Phoebe being a woman deacon, to being the wife of a deacon, to being a deaconess, an office in the church more in evidence a little later on in church history. The fact is that the most basic and frequent meaning of this term is "Minister". Phoebe is also addressed as "helper". The Greek term appearing here can mean a woman set over others, a female guardian, a protectoress. While care needs to be made not to place too much emphasis upon these terms describing Phoebe, it does appear that she was engaged in both pastoring and administrating. The apostle Paul did address her as "sister", a title expressing a sense of equality and close partnership in ministry.

From these highlights of women leaders in the Bible, several

conclusions can be made. Women are called of God to preach, to teach, to pastor, and to administrate. Women are disciples; they are sisters; and they serve God on equal par with their brothers.

What, then, are we to make of those passages in Scripture which seem plainly to prohibit women from even so much as speaking audibly in church? In dealing with such passages, Dr. Duke K. McCall, retiring president of the Southern Baptist Theological Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, writes: "Most Baptists have long since explained the admonitions to women to keep silent in the church as being rooted in an effort to calm a controversy in a **local** situation. They have not been understood by most Baptists as a universal injunction against female speech or female leadership in the church." If this be so, we are left with no biblical precedent for the ordaining of women to the role of bishop or its equivalent, and no specific prohibition against doing so.

In looking at those passages in the Epistles which have created the most conflict regarding the place of women in the church, it is only fair to begin by acknowledging that two dissimilar traditions seem to be present: the one egalitarian (Galatians 3:27ff.), which accords women full and equal partnership in the Christian community and mission, and the other patriarchal which, based upon current practices in Judaism and Hellenism, stood for the subordinate role of women. That there are these two conflicting traditions should not surprise us, for there were other tensions in the early church as well.

There were the Judaizers who thought that all Gentiles, in becoming Christians, should submit to circumcision, and there were others who were determined to rejoice in the liberty wherein Christ had made them free! In other words, it is a mistake to assume that the New Testament reflects only one tradition. Plainly, in the matter of the place of women in the church, there is a tension between the egalitarian and the patriarchal points of view. This point must be faced squarely.

Let us briefly examine the three passages which are most frequently used to challenge the acceptance of women ministers. The first two are in I Corinthians and the third is in I Timothy. In I Corinthians 11:4-15 Paul expresses a concern that women, when praying or prophesying, should do so with veiled heads. It is noteworthy that Paul does not prevent the woman from praying in the church! The issue is the wearing of veils. In Greek culture of that day prostitutes were forbidden to wear veils, and Paul is anxious that Christian women, with their new-found freedom in Christ, will not weaken their witness to the Gospel; hence the appeal for the veiling of the head.

The next troublesome passage is I Corinthians 14:34-35. The issue here is orderliness in worship. Paul has already said that women could pray and preach in church but should keep veiled and keep their hair long, but apparently another problem, peculiar to the Corinthian church, had come to the attention of the apostle, namely, disorderliness in worship. As we know, the apostle had all manner of

difficulty with the Corinthian church with respect to public worship. Some wished to exercise their gifts of speaking in tongues indiscriminately, thus causing a hubbub! The situation was so drastic that the apostle Paul felt obliged to make some very specific recommendations.

One cause of the disorder - unrelated to tongues - was that certain women were forever interrupting the order of service asking all kinds of questions that added to the general confusion. Quite wisely, the apostle asks these offending persons (conceivably some men might have been included) to shut up and to wait until they returned home to ask their questions of their husbands.

While this passage specifically applies to wives, it is counsel that the apostle gives to all Christians elsewhere. Do not abuse your freedom, he says, if it seriously hampers the witness of the Gospel or if it does not significantly contribute to the edification of all in worship. But surely one cannot use this particular instance as a prohibition against women participating in the church's worship or ministry! Subtract the women from most of our churches, and what would you have left? There would be very few choirs, very few Sunday Schools, and very little participation of women in the mid-week service of prayer.

Incidentally, one of my own hallowed memories has to do with a recollection of my mother acting as Sunday School Superintendent of the Highfield Street Baptist Church when the total Sunday School numbered 1,200 and of her voice lifted in prayer at the mid-week service.

The last passage for our consideration is the most confusing of all - I Timothy 2:11-15. Once again, the historical situation must be taken into account. Paul writes to Timothy who is in Ephesus (I Tim. 1:3). Timothy clearly is facing serious problems in giving leadership and guidance to the church in that famous but profligate city. As in Corinth, Paul is aware of the danger that the Christians may fail to offer a good witness to the world, and therefore lays down some rather stringent instructions for that particular situation. These concern not only Christian doctrine (1:3-20) but also Christian worship (2:1-15), including the appropriate dress and demeanour of women in a difficult city (2:9-15). Even so, the passage ends with the enigmatic statement that women will be saved by bearing children. That statement has no meaning at all for the many single women or the many married women who are unable to conceive. Moreover, the implications of verse 15 appear to be at complete odds with Paul's thorough and often repeated proclamation that salvation is solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ!

The passage starts with the terse admonition that no "woman is to teach; she is to have no authority over men; and she is to keep silent. All three deny Paul's own performance in ministry. Priscilla did indeed instruct Apollos, and Paul did not rebuke her. Instead he held her in high esteem before all the churches and referred to her as a co-worker. He commended Phoebe who was a minister in the church at Cenchreae and who did perform administrative responsibilities

for many, including Paul. Junia was referred to as an outstanding apostle, a distinction and designation affirmed by some of the early "fathers" including Chrysostom, Origen of Alexandria, and Jerome. Paul spoke of Euodia and Syntyche as those who "laboured side by side with me in the gospel." (Phil. 4:2-3).

It must be evident by now that two traditions are reflected in the Epistles: the one egalitarian and the other patriarchal, for the Timothean passage just discussed is completely opposite to Paul's great discourse on the liberty in the Spirit expressed in Galatians and epitomized by Galatians 3:27ff., "for as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have put on Christ. There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Indeed, the three difficult passages examined above are in clear tension with Paul's lengthy teachings about the gifts given to all believers, to be used by all for the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12). There is no indication whatever in all three of these books (Galatians, Roman and I Corinthians) that only males are joint-heirs with Jesus. There is no indication whatever that the numerous gifts given by the Spirit dwelling in every believer are given only to males. All Christians have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, and every believer is advised to use her or his gift or gifts. So how can a woman having the gift of teaching or preaching do either if she is to be silent? How can a woman having a gift of administration use it if she can have no authority over a male?

We return, then, to the pivotal issue: the universal priesthood of all believers in Christ, female as well as male. There can be no true partnership and equality of the sexes in the life of the church so long as those vested with the authority to speak for God are men and men only. Certainly the New Testament itself points beyond the limitation of an all-male apostolate, and it does so in a remarkable way when one considers the times and circumstances in which the church was born. We need to keep in mind that, according to the full gospel tradition, the risen Christ appeared to women and commissioned them to tell his brethren; hence women were the initial witnesses to the event which is at the heart of the apostolic message and the basis of all Christian kerugma. Women shared in the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit. Hence there is no reason to suppose that they observed a discreet silence when the church was born, since Peter himself quotes Joel: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your **daughters** shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17).

In the light of these considerations, we conclude that women have whole title to the order of Christian Ministry as God shall call them. Let those who scruple consider only what it has cost the church, and will cost the church not to use the talent of women. Sexism must be seen for what it is, namely, discrimination, and discrimination in any form is a monstrous evil, robbing persons of dignity and worth. One caveat needs to be added. Affirming the place of women in ministry does not mean requiring women to think, speak, and act like men. This would be to

misunderstand the meaning of our sexual complementarity. Because God made man male and female, in the natural realm, men are fathers and brothers while women are mothers and sisters. So it must be in the spiritual realm and when it is, then, and only then, will the church be truly the family of God.

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Dr. Harold Mitton was the Principal of Acadia Divinity College from 1975 to 1985. Prior to 1975 he served Baptist pastorates in Aylesford (NS), Windsor (NS), Charlottetown (First Baptist), Fredericton (Brunswick Street), and Calgary (First Baptist). He lives in retirement in Wolfville (NS) with his wife Marguerite.