

The Role of Women in the Church

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One of the “thorny” issues throughout the centuries has been the issue of a woman’s rightful place in the leadership and ministry of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church has always held to its historic position of an all male clergy. Women are allowed to serve as lay ministers, but never granted full ordination. With the Protestant Reformation, however, the principle of the “priesthood of all believers” was rediscovered. Nonetheless, a woman’s rightful place in the church and in ministry has continued to be debated. The Roman Catholic Church and a few other major denominations have continued to hold their stand. Interestingly, in recent years there has also arisen in fundamentalist circles the same phenomenon.

Then there is the Church of God and a host of other groups who historically have said that women do have a rightful place in ordained ministry and in the leadership of the local church. From the birth of our movement, it has never been an issue as to whether or not women belong in ministry or in the leadership of the local church. Our history is rich with women evangelists, pastors, Bible teachers and preachers. In fact, the first pastor of the First Church of God, Germantown, Ohio, was a woman – Sarah Cox. The same would be true of many other of our congregations as well.

The reason women in ministry and leadership is an issue at all is primarily centered in some of Paul’s writings, in particular I Timothy 2:11-15, I Corinthians 14:33-36, and I Corinthians 11:2-16. Connected to these are passages such as Ephesians 5:22-24 and Colossians 3:18 which speak of women being submissive to husbands, etc. Though they say nothing about women in leadership, they do speak of a woman’s relationship to her husband.

The central question to be asked, especially in reading from I Timothy and I Corinthians, is this:

Was Paul responding to local situations that needed to be remedied, or was he setting forth a universal rule to be applied in all churches for all time?

How we answer this question determines the stance we take. If Paul laws addressing local and cultural issues, then perhaps women can and do have a place in ministry. If, however, he as setting forth a universal principle, then we must not ordain women or accept their place in the leadership of the local church. If we adopt this interpretation, which is a very literalistic approach, then it would seem to me that to be consistent, we must also uphold passages such as I Timothy 2:9-10 and not allow our wives/women to do their hair, wear their jewelry and makeup nor wear their expensive clothing.

My belief is that the first interpretation above is the appropriate one as seems to be supported by Paul's use of the first person singular in I Timothy 2:12: *"I do not permit...."* Paul is here referring to his personal practice, not setting forth a universal principle.

Let me now set forth some ground rules that biblical scholars would hold that we need to keep if we are to rightly read and interpret Scripture:

1. We must read the passage in the light of all other Scripture. What does the entirety of scripture seem to be saying? When we look at this issue of women in ministry, we see in Romans 16:3 Priscilla being called by Paul *"a fellow worker in Christ Jesus."* In Philipppines 4:3 Paul refers to Euodia and Syntyche as *"these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers."*
2. We must distinguish between passages that describe events or practices at the time, and those that clearly teach principles designed for universal and timeless application. For example, we read in the Gospels that Jesus turned water into wine, but that is no indication that we are to do the same. Likewise, certain things happened in the early church that are described in Acts. Just because they are reported does not necessarily mean that they are to be regular patterns in the church today.
3. We must read a passage within its cultural, social, and historical setting. In the New Testament church, for example, it was considered right and appropriate for woman to veil her head in worship. In I Corinthians 11 Paul addresses this issue and in verse 5 says: *"...every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...."* If taken at face value without considering the culture, we must conclude, as have the Roman Catholics, that a woman must veil her head in worship. That

means to be consistent we must change our practice. Probably all of us would say this is a cultural, social matter not to be taken to literally.

It was also Jewish custom that when praying in the synagogue one should pray with hands uplifted and extended. In I Timothy 2:8 Paul says, *“I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer....”* Again, if taken literally and extended universally, the only acceptable way of praying in public worship would be to do so with hands uplifted and extended. Again, to be consistent, we would have to change our practice.

Let me now share something of the cultural and historical context in which Paul wrote. He wrote against a double background:

1. He wrote against a Jewish background. In Jewish eyes, women officially had a very low position. In Jewish law a woman was not a person; she was a thing. She was entirely at the disposal of her father or husband. She was forbidden to learn the law. To instruct a woman in the law was to cast pearls before swine. Women had no place in Synagogue worship. They were put in a shut off place in the synagogue where they could not be seen. Never were they permitted to be an active participant. Women, slaves and children were classed together. In the Jewish morning prayer a man thanked God that God had not made him *“a Gentile, a slave or a woman.”* It was out of such a Jewish background that the Church arose.
2. Paul wrote against a Greek background. The place of women in Greek religion was also low. The respectable Greek woman lived a very confined life. Because of rampant prostitution in the name of religion, a respectable woman lived in quarters into which no one but her husband came. She did not even appear at meals. She never appeared on the streets alone. She never went to any public assembly or did she ever speak or take part in such assemblies. The fact is that if in a Greek town Christian women had taken an active and a speaking part in the church, the church would have gotten the reputation of being the resort of loose and immoral women.

When Paul wrote in I Timothy 2:9 that women should not braid their hair, wear gold and pearls, etc., it was because only women of low morals, in particular the prostitutes, dressed in such a fashion. Again, for Christian women to have done so would have brought reproach upon the church in that culture.

MY CONVICTION

When we look at the whole of Scripture, we have no basis for holding women back from leadership in the church. To take the Bible seriously means we must begin with the creation of male and female, **both** in the image of God. It must also mean that we recognize and honor the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to **all** believers. It means we must recognize the call God places on each of our lives, regardless of sex. Otherwise, what do we say to female pastors like Lillie McCutcheon who had a long and blessed ministry? Do we tell her that she misunderstood and was wrong in her sense of calling to ministry? As for me, I'm not about to be so spiritually arrogant and dogmatic.

I just received a phone call from Ann Smith, former missionary, former Interim President of the Missionary Board for the Church of God, now Director of Church Relations for Anderson University. A few years ago she was bestowed with an honorary doctorate for her years of ministry and service to the church. Ann said in essence to me, *"I don't understand a lot of what Scripture says. But this I know. God placed a call on my life I could not escape. While I may not understand it, I have sought to be true to it."* God has marvelously blessed the ministry of this great minister of the Gospel who has given herself so unselfishly through the years. Who among us would be so bold as to say, *"Ann, you misread God. You are wrong in being in a place of ministry and leadership in the church?"*

Measure it how you wish, when you know the stories of great women like Lillie McCutcheon and Ann Smith, when you see the visible evidence of what God has done and is still doing, it seems to me that one must conclude that God does not give or withhold his gifts and his calling based upon sexuality. For God to do so would be in contradiction to Paul's cornerstone statement in Galatians 3:28: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

MY HOPE AND PRAYER

My hope and prayer is that we can grow in our ability to love and respect one another in our differences. I believe I can respect and accept those who believe Paul has laid down a universal rule that only men are to be in the church's leadership. I hope those persons can grant me the same. I know those who would differ from me take Scripture very seriously. My hope is that those persons can believe that I do the same. I suppose that in God's time we will discover if one of us is indeed wrong. In the meantime, we must love one

another, accept one another, and if possible, work side by side as co-laborers in the Lord's vineyard. Never must we allow such controversial issues as this to become a test of orthodoxy nor a test of fellowship. This is a fundamental doctrine of the Church of God which says that our unity comes not from agreement on all issues of doctrine and practice, but in Jesus Christ and the common salvation we enjoy as God's gracious gift to us. Regardless of where we stand on this issue and numerous others, our hope and our unity lies in Christ Jesus and in him alone. To Him be the glory, now and forever more. Let us each be faithful to the gift and the calling he has given to us.