

The Role of Women in the Church

With the advent of the feminist movement, the role of women in all parts of society has come under increasing scrutiny. One area of recent controversy is the role of women in the Christian Church.

Some churches whose traditions and practices are less rigidly tied to Biblical doctrines have begun placing women in leadership positions such as pastor or teacher. Other churches which interpret the Bible more literally have been slow to adopt such changes. Much of the confusion is based on attempts to interpret scriptures pertaining to women. In this essay, we will use the Bible to understand the role of women in the church of the first century and apply that understanding to the church of the twentieth century.

Many people would dispute the Bible's relevance to contemporary thought in general, and in particular to the role of women in worship. If the Bible were not written under divine inspiration, a person or practice is not bound by its teachings. He or she can therefore pick and choose whatever corresponds to his/her point of view. However, if the Bible is of divine inspiration, then a cautious consideration of passages relevant to a particular issue must be undertaken. Traditions and customs that have arisen after the Bible was written may thus be carefully scrutinized. Such practices may or may not prove sound after comparison with scripture.

Before we discuss specific issues concerning women in worship, we should consider principles derived from the relationship of Adam and Eve as described in Genesis chapter one. The Apostle Paul frequently uses this passage as a guideline when discussing women and women's issues. Genesis 1 verse 27 states: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Most Commentators agree that man and woman are both equally a reflection of God's image; the word "man" here is used as a synonym for humanity. Adam and Eve were also given joint dominion over creation. But the fact that Adam was created before Eve has significance to Paul and other Old Testament scholars; it signifies role distinction between the two sexes. The role of the man is leadership, while the role of woman is as a source of strength and support. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul states: "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. . ." (Eph. 5:23) This is an important analogy. If a person wants to understand the Christian authority of a man over his wife, he must consider how Christ demonstrated his leadership as head over the Church. Primarily, he gave his life for his church,

not using force or coercion for her submission. When considering men's and women's ministry in the church, it is important to keep in mind this role distinction.

Let's examine the public ministry of women in the Church. Two major passages give specific instructions regarding women during worship in the letters of the Apostle Paul. These two passages are used frequently when denying women a public role in church life. The first is in I Corinthians chapter 14 verses 33 - 35, this passage commands women to be silent during worship service. Similarly but with more details, I Timothy 2 verses 8 - 15 not only contains a command to be silent but also instruction on authority along with a reference to the fall of Adam and Eve for further explanation. Here is the passage in its entirety using the NIV (New International Version) Bible translation:

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

A woman raised in the U.S. in this day and age, reading the letter for the first time, may be quite taken aback by its apparent chauvinism. However, there are some specific historical and cultural references that must be taken into account when considering the meaning and intent of this passage. First of all, this was a letter written by Paul to a young preacher named Timothy. Timothy was presumably preaching at the church in the city of Ephesus. Paul starts out the letter by telling him to stay in Ephesus and correct false teachers who were creating a disruption in the church. Various commentators have tried to re-create some of the heresies of these false teachers. This can be a difficult task since there is not a record of exactly what was being said, so only remarks made in the text itself can give a clue. One probable heresy was the idea of asceticism as a way to achieve spirituality. The ascetic practices being recommended consisted of; abstinence from certain foods, from marriage, and sex. Add to all of this physical training as an additional means of spirituality. It

was thought that through these practices, one could achieve something akin to heaven on earth. In other words, there was possibly a denial of a future physical resurrection being taught in favor of a spiritual one that could be achieved in their present lifetimes. It seems also from Paul's remarks that many women in the church had been converted to this message and they were being persuaded to renounce their traditional roles in favor of a more egalitarian way of life in line with their new-found spirituality. This would explain the strong words Paul makes in reference to Eve, reminding the women that she was indeed led into sin, and that bearing children and raising them was a good thing, not unspiritual as they were being taught.

Yet, the other parts of this passage that admonish women not to teach and not to have authority over a man have been agreed upon by many, if not most, commentators to have timeless application; the words and grammar in Greek do not lend themselves to any cultural reference. The teaching that Paul is concerned about here is specifically the truths of the faith while the authority in question refers to women in governing or leadership positions of the church.

But, before making conclusions on a Biblical truth it is important to see if the truth holds fast throughout the whole of scripture. Let's consider some other passages. In Galatians 3 verse 28, Paul states: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Some commentators have suggested that this teaching could have had some influence in the false teachings that were encountered in Ephesus and Corinth in regard to women. Christ himself taught that in the afterlife, men and women would not be given in marriage and they would be like the angels. Thus, the women were being encouraged, by some misguided teachers, to renounce their traditional roles. Without taking this radical extreme, the modern reader is at least inclined to ask what it means that men and women are one in Christ Jesus? It must certainly mean that there is not one sex inferior to the other.

Beyond this, there are clear examples in the book of Acts that may shed some light by way of documented practice, on the command not to have authority over men. First of all, there were prophetesses. In Acts 21: 8 - 9, Philip, one of the seven deacons, is said to have four daughters who prophesied. Prophesying was not primarily divination of the future but also the conveying of God's Word to his people, i. e. teaching. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 11: 4 - 5 Paul states, "Every woman who prays or prophesies. . ." Clearly women in Corinth were praying and prophesying during the worship service. There is also the case of Precilla and Aquila described

in Acts Chapter

18. Many Commentators feel it is significant that whenever this couple are mentioned in the Bible, Precilla, the women, is mentioned first because of her great knowledge. It appears that they worked together as a teaching team and their effectiveness is demonstrated when they taught Apollos "the ways of the Lord more adequately" (Acts 18: 26). Apollos is described as a learned man who came to Ephesus and began teaching from the scriptures in a knowledgeable way although lacking in one of the fundamental teachings. Another Case in point is a business woman named Lydia who lived in Philippi. She accepted the Gospel message from Paul and Silas while at a place of prayer. After this incident is recorded, a strong church is mentioned in Philippi later in the Bible. We can only surmise that she played a significant part in the growth of this church, since no men were initially converted.

These passages all call into question the real nature of the moratorium on teaching and the meaning of no authority mentioned in 1st Timothy. That women were teaching men is obvious, although at times they may have been co-teaching with male teachers. The case of the prophetesses is also compelling because although most churches do not recognize prophecy as being a modern gift, teaching certainly is and this was one of the important functions of a prophet.

Some Commentators in discussing women's ministry in the New Testament have brought to light the customs of the day regarding women. Paul's main concern was the spread of the Gospel and that the message could be made attractive in every way. For this reason Paul encourages women in other passages to continue observing social customs such as the wearing of a veil; otherwise people might criticize them as loose or immoral and belittle the Gospel message. This is, I believe, a valid thought not only in 1st century times but in our culture today. Consider, for example, what non believing women in the US think upon entering a Christian assembly for the first time and seeing a service that appears to be run completely by men? They may conclude that women are being suppressed and that the gospel message makes women inferior to men.

In conclusion, we can say that although there is no sanction in scripture for women to take roles of leadership, public ministry and teaching are not as clearly forbidden and a degree of latitude in interpretation is warranted. More importantly, if women are not allowed to have a voice or some kind of input, the church could be losing a valuable resource. If a husband does not consider his wives thoughts and ideas as being important or valid, his family is surely incomplete, dysfunctional and doomed to failure. Therefore, as the church strives to realize Gods purpose for

women, we must
remember the truths of the scripture and apply them to our present day culture.
This will allow men
and women to present the Christian message to our world in the most powerful way.
That is exactly
what the Apostle Paul desired along with all of the New Testament leaders and it is
what we should
desire as we consider the path of the modern church.