

A Biblical & Theological Basis for Women in Ministry

At its 1976 Annual Meeting The Evangelical Covenant Church voted to go on record as favoring the ordination of women. At the 1981 Annual Meeting a motion to rescind that action was overwhelmingly defeated. However, some Covenant people still have questions about the role of women in the ordained ministry. Were the decisions made legitimately or were they merely a reflection of new movements in our society? The changes affecting women in the modern era have obviously influenced the Church's thinking, but the ministry of women is neither derived from society's ideas nor a partner to its extremes. For a tradition that is based on the question "Where is it written?" only one foundation is satisfactory for having women minister in the name of Jesus Christ. Women ought to minister not because society says so but because the Bible leads the Church to such a conclusion. A legitimate biblical and theological basis for women in ministry is, therefore, crucial to the ongoing implementation of the Covenant's decision regarding the ordination of women.

Biblical Passages on the Ministry of Women

Usually when people speak of biblical texts on the ministry of women, they refer to only two texts, the two that appear opposed to the idea. These texts will need to be treated justly, but all of the Bible must be included in the discussion, not just two verses. Moreover, as with the interpretation of all Scripture, these two texts must be understood in their proper historical and biblical contexts. The Bible is not like a flat landscape, but is more like varied terrain, and each part must be dealt with in its own right. This is not to suggest that some parts may be ignored or are more important than others, but merely to stress that all the Bible must be treated fairly. The issue of women in ministry is primarily a New Testament discussion, but there are Old Testament texts that deserve attention. Genesis 1:26-28 indicates that man and woman were created together in the image of God and that dominion was given to both of them. In various contexts (such as Exodus 38:8 and 1 Samuel 2:1-10) women are mentioned as playing a part in Israel's worship. More important are the women who functioned in leadership roles and consequently provide an Old Testament basis for women in ministry. Miriam and Huldah are both referred to as prophetesses who had significant roles in God's purposes (Exodus 15:20,21 and 2 Kings 22:14-20). Deborah is also referred to as a prophetess, but she is best remembered for her activity as a judge of Israel and a leader in a time of conflict (Judges 4-5). These texts do not legitimate the ministry of women by themselves, but they do provide important precedents.

The New Testament texts referring to women present a view that is markedly different from the negative view of women predominant in ancient societies. Women in biblical times usually were not educated, and rabbis warned against teaching the law to females. The limited information from ancient sources indicates that women who were considered respectable did not take part in public life. Rather, such women were expected to spend most of their lives within the confines of the home. Women were viewed as temptations to sin. They were not counted in the number of persons needed to have a synagogue, nor was their testimony accepted in a court of law. But Jesus' attitude and practice was in direct contradiction to that of his contemporaries. He initiated conversation even with unrespectable females like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Because of her witness, many of the townspeople believed in Jesus. Jesus had women disciples who accompanied him from Galilee to Jerusalem and helped finance his ministry (Mark 15:40,41 and Luke 8:1-3). Jesus taught Mary and defended her choice to learn (Luke 10:38-42). Women were the last at the cross and the first at

the tomb. After his resurrection Jesus appeared first to women and gave them the task of telling the good news to the disciples (Matthew 28:7).

The new-found freedom and role of women in Christ is clear also in the writings of the early Church. The book of Acts frequently mentions the presence and activity of women in the founding of the Church. From the praying in the upper room (1: 14) to the persecution by Saul (8:3) to the reception of the Gospel by Greeks (17:12), women were involved. Of major importance is the quotation of Joel 2:28-32 which is used in Acts 2:17-21 to explain the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. With this event the promise had been fulfilled that God would pour out his Spirit so that both sons and daughters would prophesy. The church at Philippi was founded on women, and one of them, Lydia, obviously played an important role in the origin and growth of this church. The four prophesying daughters of Philip, who are mentioned in Acts 21:9, are further examples of the ministry of the Holy Spirit through women. The ministry of women becomes even clearer in the writings of Paul. In Christ racial, societal, and sexual barriers have been broken down so that all are made one. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This newly found oneness does not refer merely to our standing before God or to a oneness to be found at Christ's second coming. It refers also to the present, for it is the basis of Paul's rebuke of Peter's hypocrisy in no longer eating with Greeks in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21). In the American Civil War era some people argued that this verse had no social implications for the question of slavery, but most Christians have come to see the error of this judgment. There is nothing in Christianity that relates only to our salvation; our faith relates to all of life, including the roles of male and female. The issue is whether our attitudes concerning race, social class, and gender will be determined by our oneness in Christ in the new age or by the barriers and values of the old age.

In Paul's letters we encounter a significant number of women who were engaged in the work of the Gospel. We are not told the details of what any of these women did in their ministries, but the same language that Paul used of himself and his male helpers is used of them. Romans 16 mentions ten different women who were engaged in various kinds of ministries. Phoebe, who was probably the person who delivered the letter to the Romans, is described with the Greek word *diakonos* (which can be translated as "deacon" or "servant") and as one who helped many, including Paul (Romans 16:1,2). Prisca, also referred to as Priscilla, is called a fellow worker of Paul in 16:3. She and Aquila, her husband, had a church in their house, and the two of them instructed Apollos in Christian doctrine (Acts 18:26). Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis were all women that Paul described as ones who labored in the Lord (Romans 16:6 and 12). It is also probable that Romans 16:7 refers to a woman, Junia, as an apostle, rather than to a man named Junias as in many translations of this text. (Since there is no evidence of this name being used for a man, the charge of a male bias in some translations is difficult to avoid.) In Philippians 4:2,3 two other women, Euodia and Syntyche, are said to have struggled along with Paul and his other fellow-workers in the Gospel. Such evidence cannot be discounted.³

First Corinthians 11:5 is one of the most important passages regarding women in ministry. This text is often overlooked because of other questions, but it is clear that women were praying and prophesying in the early Church. The only concern about their activity was for proper decorum in the way they dressed. We cannot easily argue that women were allowed to prophesy but were not allowed to preach or teach. The New Testament does not make such a distinction between prophesying and teaching (See 1 Corinthians 14:3 and 31).

Biblical Passages Used Against the Ministry of Women

One of the beneficial aspects of the discussion of women in ministry is that it has helped us to become more conscious of the way we understand and apply Scripture. Our concern in interpreting any part of Scripture must go beyond a superficial reading that violates the original intention of the passage. Our focus should be on *why* the words of the text were written. Only if we understand why a text was written will we be able to apply it appropriately. For proper interpretation texts must be read in context and in light of the rest of Scripture. To isolate texts from their contexts or to deal only with passages suitable to our ideas leads to distortion. In such instances we may do justice to the letter of Scripture without ever discerning its spirit. A case in point is the way some people have viewed 1 Timothy 3:1-7 as a barrier to women in ministry because it states that an "**overseer**"(or bishop) should be the husband of one wife. To suggest that this injunction excludes women from ministry is to ignore the text's intention. The passage focuses on the necessity of fidelity in a monogamous relationship as one of several tests of the moral character of an overseer. There is no attempt to provide an eternal decree that overseers should always be married men. Certainly no attempt has been made on the basis of this verse to exclude single men from ministry. Nor has the guideline that an overseer should rule his own house well (verse 4) been automatically used to prevent fathers of rebellious children from ministering. A literalistic interpretation is inappropriate.

First Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11,12 are of a different character, however, and must not be brushed aside. These two texts are well-known for their imposition of silence on women, and clearly seem contradictory to the passages supporting women in ministry.

With regard to 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, how can we understand the fact that within the one epistle, 1 Corinthians, Paul both gave directions for proper dress when women were praying and prophesying and asked for their silence? People have often attempted to explain away either 1 Corinthians 11:5 or 14:34-36 to remove the difficulty. They have suggested that two different kinds of service were in mind or that one of the texts was added by someone else later or that Paul did not really mean what he said in one or the other of the texts. None of these explanations will do, and justice must be done to both passages. We cannot allow ourselves to ignore the texts that do not fit with our preconceived ideas. The context of 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 begins with verse 26, and it is clear that the worship of the early Church was different from our usual services. When the church met for worship, all the people were encouraged to make a contribution to the service by offering some item for praise or instruction. Paul's concern in 14:26-36 is the disruption of the service. Women are not the only ones asked to be silent. Anyone who was going to speak in tongues is told to keep silent if no interpreter were present (14:28). Also, if one prophet were speaking and revelation came to someone else, the first prophet should be silent (14:30). Nor were women the only ones told to be in submission. The various prophets were to be submissive to each other as well (14:32). The service was to be orderly because God is a God of peace (14:33 and 40). The last part of verse 33 (" . . . as in **all** the churches of the saints") should probably be read with the rest of verse 33, rather than with verse 34 as in some translations. The issue with regard to women is clearly within the context of the disruption of the worship service. The new-found freedom of women in Christ no doubt caused difficulties in the Corinthian church and elsewhere, as passages like this and 11:2-16 show. Apparently married women were disrupting the service by asking questions of their husbands, so they were instructed to wait and ask their questions at home. It seems from 14:36 that this disruption of the service was one of several ways that pride was manifesting itself in the Corinthian church. This activity was considered shameful, particularly in an ancient culture where any public exposure of women was considered a disgrace.

There are still unanswered questions about this text, such as which Old Testament passage is referred to with "as the law says" in 14:34. But regardless of such questions, clearly this passage says what it does because of problems in the Corinthian church and attitudes in the ancient world and not because women should never speak in church. To suggest otherwise removes 1 Corinthians 14:34 from its context and creates an insurmountable contradiction with 11:5. The text in 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 is more difficult to understand, but the issues are the same. There is no question that in this passage women were prohibited from teaching men. The question is "Why?" Were there reasons in this circumstance why women were prohibited from teaching, or were women never to teach men? If the latter, there are blatant contradictions between this text and other texts like 1 Corinthians 11:5. A commitment to the unity of Scripture, and indeed an assumption of the unity of Paul's thought (assuming some form of Pauline authorship), requires a closer analysis of this passage.

There **are** specific indications as to the reason why women were prohibited from teaching in this circumstance. Clearly the pastoral epistles were not written to be manuals of church government. Rather they were written to combat false teaching and heresy. Approximately one-fifth of the two hundred and forty-two verses in the pastorals explicitly treat false teaching. If false teaching is a concern of the pastorals, it is *the* concern of 1 Timothy. Immediately in 1 Timothy 1:3 the concern to prevent false teaching is expressed as the reason Timothy was left in Ephesus. Speculations about myths and genealogies, along with emphasis on knowledge and asceticism had led many astray. Some of the best successes of the false teachers were among women. First Timothy 5 treats a number of problems caused by women in connection with false-teaching. The concern in 5:13 is not merely for gossiping, but for spreading the false teaching which has "turned some aside to follow Satan" (5:15). Second Timothy 3:6,7 speaks of false teachers who creep into houses and take captive "silly women" who are ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.⁵

The whole of 1 Timothy 2 must be interpreted within this context of false teaching. The focus of the whole chapter is prayer, but the concern over false teachers is clear in 2:8, where men are told to pray *without wrath and disputing*, and in 2:14, where the issue is fear of deception. Even with this recognition of the context of false teaching, 1 Timothy 2:8-15 still has several debated issues. In 2:9 it is preferable to understand that women are to pray with proper decorum in the way they dress, which is the same subject as in 1 Corinthians 11:5. Alternatively, some translations would suggest that the concern is merely for the way women dress with no thought about their praying. (The issue is whether with "likewise" in 2:9 the meaning is "likewise I desire women to pray" or "likewise I desire.") Also some translations say in 2:11 that a woman should learn "in silence," but "in quietness" would be more appropriate. The same root word is used in 2:2 with regard to the quiet and tranquil life that all are to lead. The desire is that both men and women pray and that women in Ephesus learn in submission and quietness, as indeed is expected of all Christians.

The most difficult part of this passage is 2:12, which is usually translated as: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness." The problem is with the word translated "have dominion over" (*authentein* in Greek), for it does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. This is not the usual word for authority. Outside the Bible the word is used of murder, suicide, having dominion over, and, some argue, of sexual offenses. The original idea seems to have been "to thrust oneself." The uses of the word for murder and suicide obviously are not pertinent for this text. If the reference is to authority, as seems likely, the negative connotations of this word would require a translation such as

"domineer." Whatever the meaning, what is prohibited of women with this word seems so negative that it would not be permitted of men either.

The words of 1 Timothy 2:13-15 are difficult on any understanding of the text, but they seem to be caustic comments directed at women influenced by false teachers to leave their responsibilities. The only other reference to Eve in the New Testament is in 2 Corinthians 11:3 which is also concerned with seduction by false teachers. Elsewhere when the fall of humanity is discussed, reference is always to the disobedience of Adam. In a society where women were not educated and had not previously been full participants in everyday life, without doubt women would have been easy targets for false teachers. There is no need, therefore, to see a contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11:5, where women are viewed as praying and prophesying, and 1 Timothy 2:12 where women are prohibited from teaching men. The prohibition in 1 Timothy 2 was required by conditions in that time and place.

Specifically the prohibition was required because false teachers had led women to leave their domestic responsibilities, to be disruptive, and to be nonproductive in the community. These words should not be used as a universal prohibition of teaching by women. Those who are quick to argue against women in ministry on the basis of texts like 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11,12 need to ask why they do not imitate the kind of church service described in 1 Corinthians 14:26-36 or why they do not institute widows' roles and care for widows according to the instructions of 1 Timothy 5. Using proof-texts out of context and using only the parts of the text that we like are not suitable practices for a church claiming to believe the Bible. Likewise, we ought not to set some texts against others as if to suggest that we may choose the one group and ignore the others.

Further Theological Considerations

In addition to a discussion of the relevant biblical texts, there are several theological issues that are decisive for the position one takes on women in ministry. Often assumptions are made about these topics that are informed more from our society or traditions than by the Bible and the Gospel. A reconsideration of these topics can lead to the removal of many of the barriers to effective ministry in our time.

Authority

Often when people are opposed to women in ministry, the real issue is not the Bible, but authority. They argue that women ought not be in positions of authority. Such people need to ask themselves what authority really is and why men may have it and women may not. Misunderstood texts dealing with husband-wife relationships have wrongly been applied to the question of women in ministry. For example, people have viewed the term "helpmeet" in Genesis 2:18 as a basis for arguing for the inferiority of the woman. The words in question, however, mean "a helper suitable for him" and do not suggest inferiority, for the same word "helper" is also used of God (Deuteronomy 33:7). Similarly, people argue that women are not to be in positions of authority because in Genesis 3:16 Eve was told that her husband would rule over her. However, these words are descriptive of life after the fall, not descriptive of what God had intended for humanity. The biggest offense is that people have assumed this world's understanding of authority and applied it to the Church, but in Christ authority must be understood differently. The classic text dealing with authority is Matthew 20:25-28 in which Jesus instructed his disciples that the world's views on authority and greatness ought not be their view. Rather than leaders lording over and having authority over others, the leaders should be their servants. This teaching is valid, not only for the ministry, but for family relationships

and all other kinds of leadership roles. Ephesians 5:22, however, is often used to argue that women should not be in authority since wives should be in submission to their husbands. It is questionable whether texts dealing with the marriage relationship should be applied to the question of women in ministry. But apart from that, the more important point is that Ephesians 5:22 is one of the most abused texts in the Bible. The submission of wives must be seen only as one example of the mutual submission that is required of all Christians in 5:21. In fact, in the manuscripts of 5:22 followed by most editions of the Greek New Testament, the word "submit" is not even present; it is assumed from verse 21. From this world's perspective- mutual submission does not make sense but it is merely another way of expressing the point of Matthew 20:25-28. In the context of the ancient world, wives were instructed to submit to their husbands because Christianity with its call of total commitment to Christ was viewed as a threat to the family. In Titus 2:5 wives are asked to submit *so that the word of God is not blasphemed*. Husbands are referred to as "head" in Ephesians 5, but only to place greater responsibility on the husband in caring for the wife. He is to give himself for her in *love* as Christ gave himself for the Church. Both in the family and in the Church *mutual submission* is the controlling principle.

In recent times some people have granted that women may minister, but argue that women ought not be in positions of ultimate authority. Such a distinction cannot be defended, for no biblical texts indicate two levels of authority in ministry. We do not need a view of authority that will keep women from functioning in ministry. We need a view of ministry that subverts what this world understands by authority. Mutual submission is the Gospel in action.

Ministry

Often when people are opposed to women in ministry, their opposition is based on their view of ministry. Particularly if the Old Testament priesthood is taken as the model for ministry, women will hardly be accepted as pastors since only men were priests in the Old Testament, and only men who were Levites at that. Even in the Old Testament, however, the original intention was that the Israelites should be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6), and this idea becomes important in the New Testament. While there are some parallels between the Old Testament priesthood and Christian ministry, the former is not an appropriate model for the latter. As Protestants, we do not have priests; rather, we stress the priesthood of all believers. Stress on the priesthood of all believers ought to *require* the ministry of women. Focus on passages such as Ephesians 4:12 has rightly emphasized that ministry is the task of the Church and not just the task of the clergy. Distinctions of value, sanctity, and privilege between clergy and laity ought to be rejected, and the ministry of women is one way to emphasize the ministry of all the Church. Ordination, because it has been viewed as conferring special status on pastors, has often functioned as a barrier both to the ministry of women and to the ministry of the laity. This practice of ordaining certain people for ministry has antecedents in the New Testament, but it is not taught explicitly. This is not to argue against ordination and certainly not to argue against a professional clergy, but the Church needs to discuss what ordination means and make sure that ordination does not become more hindrance than help in proclaiming the Gospel. Ministry is not some privilege to which the few are called. It is the task of all Christians as they identify with the ministry and love of Jesus Christ.

A Gifted Church

Closely related to the discussion of the ministry of all the Church is the focus on the variety of gifts in the Body of Christ. By recognizing the diversity of gifts within its fellowship

the Church recognizes that the Spirit of God functions in different ways in different people. A person's task in the ministry of the Church is determined by the way the Spirit is manifested in that person's life and actions (1 Corinthians 12:11). Whether a woman or a man is granted the privilege of serving the Church as a pastor is not based on that person's choice to do so, but on the recognition that the Spirit of God has led and empowered that person for pastoral ministry. The requirement for pastoral ministry is manifestation of the Spirit not being a male. Nowhere in the New Testament are the gifts of the Spirit determined by gender. If women are encouraged to affirm their gifts for ministry, the Church will have new resources for evangelism, service, and discipleship. Such a new power for the spread of the Gospel could be decisive for the growth and health of the Church.

The Development of Doctrine

Some people have opposed women in ministry merely because the Church rarely has had women ministers before. There were exceptions, but basically this is true. Still it is not a valid objection. While tradition should be valued, only the Scriptures are authoritative. At numerous times in the history of the Church Christians have realized that the Gospel in their time required new thoughts, definitions, and actions that had not been expressed in earlier times. The doctrine of the Trinity is an obvious example of such developing theology. In the sixteenth century the understanding of salvation and the role of the Church were redefined. In the last century the abolition of slavery in the United States took place as a result of the application of the Gospel in new ways. In focusing on the authority of Scripture, we do not believe that God is prohibited from doing new things. Our God is alive and continually leads his people to apply the Gospel to their own time. The Gospel does not change, but the way that it is applied in a particular time and place may.

Final Considerations

Our society faces numerous problems, many of them related to sexual roles and distinctions. These problems are also problems in the Church. The extremes in our society create fears about a deterioration of family structures or other changes that might occur. The encouragement of women in ministry does not derive from these extremes and should not contribute to the fears. Women in ministry not only will release the energies of the Church for the proclamation of the Gospel, but having women in ministerial roles will also help the Church deal honestly and much more wholly than before with what it means to be a man and with what it means to be a woman. The ministry of the Church is an enormous and sometimes difficult task. The gifts and abilities of women are needed as much as those of men. Women will encounter the same kinds of problems that men do, but the Church cannot afford to erect additional obstacles that will inhibit their ministry. It is time to let the Spirit of God work through all of God's people, including women. Enjoying the freedom of the Spirit will not only mean that women are allowed to minister, but that God's people will also allow themselves to be ministered to by all those who are gifted and called by God.

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