

WOMEN AND MINISTRY

A Theological Position Paper

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By

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“Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived but the woman being quite deceived fell into transgression. But women shall be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self restraint.” I Timothy 2:11-15

These words have been read by Christians for two millennium and have been used to justify limiting women’s roles in the church and in ministry. They have been interpreted in a variety of ways, from denying women any teaching role in the church to permitting women to teach as long as they are not in an authoritative role over men. They have been the source of intense dialog for at least the last 25 years. They have been a focus of controversy throughout church history, especially when any woman or group of women demonstrated the Spirit’s gifting and practice that challenged the traditional interpretation of these verses. What do these verses mean? Are they instructions to the church for all time, or do they present to us a limitation dealing with a particular problem that existed in Ephesus at the time of Paul’s writing? What is it that makes these words controversial? Is it merely our cultural perspective that is offended by them? Why do these words seem to contradict other teaching and practice in the New Testament?

In our own time and culture, these words have become of keen interest. The debate among Bible believing Evangelicals is considerable. Brothers and sisters, who hold to the reformation dictum of “sola scriptura”, the authority of the scripture alone, find themselves poles apart on this issue. The rift is enough to cause any sincere Christian to question whether the answer can be found in Scripture and the various disciplines that are brought to bear in interpreting it. Language, grammar, and historical studies do not

seem to provide any hope that there will be a unanimous consensus in the near future, or at any time. The whole subject has made it quite clear to serious scholars just how much their “pre-understanding”, what they bring to the task of interpretation, effects perception of Scripture. If there is any subject that challenges our weakness to be objective and perceive truth, it is this one.

Four Views

There are four views that stand out when it comes to the subject of women’s roles in the church. The first view can be called the “traditional” view and probably finds its roots in the Church Fathers¹. Those who hold the traditional view declare that male and female are different and were created from the beginning for different roles. Man was created in God’s image to lead and have authority, and woman was created to be man’s “helper”. Traditionalist see in the creation story of Genesis chapter two the subordination of women to men by virtue of the order of creation, God’s designation of “helper” for the woman, and Adam’s naming of the woman. Further, God’s declaration in Genesis chapter three that “He shall rule over you” reinforces God’s design and affirms that only men are suited to leadership. Traditionalists see a consistency throughout the bible of female subordination, and any inconsistency is either an aberration or a demonstration of men abdicating their role. Traditionalists see the New Testament continuing this attitude and point to the First Timothy passage and others to support their case. Men, by virtue of creation, are to lead in society, the church, and the family, and women by creation are to

¹ Its roots, depending upon the perspective, may actually be traced to the fall recorded in Genesis which gave birth to a male dominant culture which has pervaded human history and of which the Church Fathers were simply part of.

submit to the leadership of men. Men were created in the image of God, and women were created for men.

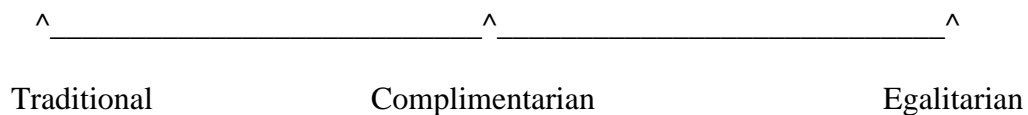
A second view, the male leadership view, and sometimes called the complimentary view, is similar to the traditional view but seeks to soften it a bit. Although those holding this view defend male leadership by creation, they tend to concede that women also were created in the image of God, an equal with the man by nature, yet created for a different role. Men are in a position of authority both in the home and in the church, and women will find fulfillment in submitting to that authority. Women may teach women, children, and sometimes even men if they are under the authority of male leadership.

A third view is called pluralism. To the pluralist, men and women were created in the image of God together. Neither one communicates fully the image of God, but together in relationship, the pluralistic nature of God (the trinity) is expressed. The creation narrative does not express a hierarchy, and both the first man and the first woman shared equal authority, leadership and mutual submission. Male dominance was a result of the fall, and the effects of that fall were reversed by Christ at the cross. Ministry and calling does not depend upon gender, but rather one's ability and gifts given by the Holy Spirit.

The fourth view is called the egalitarian view. Those who hold this view believe that the image of God is found in both men and women. The creation narrative does not establish a male hierarchy. Male hierarchy resulted from the fall. Christ demonstrated through his life and ministry a restorative attitude toward women, and the coming of the

Spirit brought a new order, re-establishing equality among the sexes. Men and women serve according to gifts, abilities and calling which are not dependent upon gender.

These four views can be understood as being points on a continuum. The left would be the traditional side with complete restriction upon women being the farthest point. The right would be the egalitarian side, with no gender distinctions being the farthest point. Positions may be found to the right or the left of these extremes depending upon how much freedom one allows a woman to participate in the ministries and leadership of the church. The complimentary view might be somewhere in the middle. The pluralistic is basically the same as the egalitarian.



Creation or Result of Sin?

One of the most important questions to be asked is clearly demonstrated by these four views. The major difference between these views is how they view creation. Did God create the hierarchal relationship between male and female or is it the result of the first pair's failure? The traditionalist and the complimentarian views would say the creation accounts in Genesis chapter one and two define a hierarchy, but the pluralist and the egalitarian see no hierarchy until the fall. One is hard put to find strong evidence for either position in chapters one or two. However, in Genesis chapter three, the evidence seems apparent.

The third chapter of Genesis contains the account of the fall of humanity. The result of that fall is what is commonly known as “the curse”. In that so-called curse, God speaks to the woman and says, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” It is clear from this verse that male rulership, male hierarchy, is the result of the fall, otherwise what is the purpose of it being stated here. In other words, if male hierarchy were ordained at creation, why would it be part of this pronouncement of judgment? This pronouncement is stating something that is changing as the result of sin. The pluralist and egalitarian seem to have the greater weight of evidence here.

The implications for this are huge, for it gives us an important starting point. Male hierarchy is a result of the fall, something that is the result of sin and not God’s will for his creation. Male dominance is something God would seek to reconcile, and not something we should see as the ideal model. Like slavery, racial bigotry, and social class distinction, gender dominance is a result of sin and what God intends to change in Christ. Since male dominance is a result of sin, it makes perfect sense that Christ came to reconcile male and female equality, which is exactly what Paul writes in Galatians².

Where One Begins

Where one lands on this subject has a lot to do with where one begins. Besides the seemingly restrictive First Timothy passage, there are a few others that come to bear on this topic. First Corinthians 11:1-16 is interpreted by traditionalists as confirming the “headship” of the male. First Corinthians 14:34-36 affirms to the traditionalist that women are to learn in silence and not teach in church. Ephesians 5:22-25 also affirms

² Galatians 3:28

male headship and female subjection as well as I Peter 3:1-7. To the traditionalist, the whole Bible portrays a patriarchal culture, dominated by men; it assumes a man's world. This is the beginning point for many traditionalists, and they read scripture through this "lens". However, what happens if one begins at a different starting point? There is a different reading. There are significant "breakouts"³ to this hierarchal pattern throughout the scripture, that at the least, give one doubt that this traditionalist reading is the only true reading of the scripture or indeed God's declared will.

In the Old Testament, there are the examples of Deborah⁴, who was a prophetess and judge, and Huldah⁵ the prophetess. Both wielded significant leadership over men, and there is no evidence that their role was anything other than God's design for them. In the New Testament, there are women listed whose role in the church went far beyond the prescriptions laid out in the restrictive passages listed above. The sixteenth chapter of Romans gives us the names of a number of women who functioned in leadership roles in the church⁶. Philippians and Colossians add to that list⁷. This can place one in a confusing dilemma. On the one hand, there appears to be injunctions for women to remain silent in the church and not to teach or have authority over a man. On the other hand, it is obvious that there was a different practice in the New Testament Church. Maybe the answer to this harmony lies in the starting point.

For the Christian, the single event that changes everything is the Christological event, the birth of Christ, His death on the cross, and His resurrection. All of life becomes

³ "Breakout" is a term used by William J Webb in his book Slaves, Women & Homosexuals, (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2001) to describe places in the biblical text that "completely overturns the expected norms". A "breakout "challenges the standard sociological patterns in the present reality." Pg. 91

⁴ Judges 4:4-5:31

⁵ II Kings 22:14-20

⁶ Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junias etc.

⁷ Phil. 4:2 (Euodia and Syntyche), Col. 4:15 (Nympha)

touched by this event, and everything is interpreted through this event. Through Christ, the Old Testament takes on a new reading; events in the Old Testament are looked at through a new lens because of Christ. It is this Christological event that must be applied to the issue at hand, and must be the defining starting point, the lens through which one interprets even this topic.

Jesus was clear to point out by word and action that he came not only to redeem men but women as well⁸. Women traveled with Him, provided material substance for His ministry, and were elevated to great dignity by His ministry to them. Even though the apostles were all men, there is good reason to believe that women were included in the other seventy disciples that Jesus sent forth⁹. It is no accident that it was to women that Jesus first revealed Himself after His resurrection. They were present in the upper room for His post resurrection appearances and they were instructed along with the twelve to wait for the promise of the Spirit, which they did. They were indeed present and the co-beneficiaries of the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost.

The Apostle Paul recognized this Christological perspective and applied it, not only to Jew and Gentile relationships, but also to slaves and freemen, and women and men.

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeman, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26-28)

⁸ Consider for example Luke 13:16, or Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4

⁹ Luke 10:1-24

People no longer are to be judged or limited according to race, social status or gender. Christ came to establish a new humanity in which all race, social, and gender distinctions are dissolved. Galatians 3:28 has been referred to as “the most socially explosive text in the New Testament¹⁰...” as indeed it is. F.F. Bruce writes concerning this passage, “Paul states the basic principle here; if restrictions on it are found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, as in I Cor. 14:34... or I Tim. 2:11f, they are to be understood in relation to Gal. 3:28, and not vice versa.”¹¹ This is the Christological perspective and the beginning point though which all other scripture must be viewed. If one begins with this Christological perspective, it effects how one interprets the rest of scripture.

The so-called restrictive texts, in Christ, take on a temporary, occasional character rather than prescriptions of behavior for all time. Because of the persuasion that Christ has abolished gender-dominated practice, a result of sin, they are to be seen as temporary or occasional. They would be interpreted accordingly.

An example of how where one begins effects ones interpretation, would be the reference to Phoebe in Romans 16¹². If one begins with the restrictive attitude, (that women are to be silent, they are not to have authority over a man) it will effect how one views several words in the text. If one begins with a non-restrictive view, it will also effect the interpretation. Paul calls Phoebe a “servant of the church which is at Cenchrea”¹³. The Greek word for “servant” is “διακονος”, a word that can be translated “minister”¹⁴, “deacon”¹⁵, or “servant”¹⁶. What is the criterion for translating this word

¹⁰ Klyne R. Snodgrass “Galatians 3:28: Conundrum or Solution” Women, Authority & the Bible ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1986) Pg. 167

¹¹ F.F. Bruce The Epistle to the Galatians, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1982), Pg. 190

¹² Romans 16:1-2

¹³ Romans 16:1

¹⁴ Ephesians 6:21, Colossians 1:23

“servant”, when it refers to Phoebe, rather than “minister” or “deacon” when either one of those words would seem to fit the context better?

Phoebe is also called a “helper” of many, translating the word “προστατις”. Thayer says that this word means, “...a woman set over others”...a female guardian, protectress, patroness”¹⁷ and is used only here in the New Testament. The masculine form of the word defined by Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich is translated “defender” or guardian” but under the female form, they add the meaning “helper”¹⁸. This word comes from the Verb “προιστημι” which means “be at the head (of), rule, direct... manage” and is used for “officials and administrators in the church”. Its secondary meaning is to be “concerned about, care for, give aid”¹⁹. It seems, then, in the context, since Paul is referring to Phoebe’s role in the church in Cenchrea, that he is referring to her oversight and leadership role, yet “helper” is the translation. How one translates these words depends upon the starting point of the interpreter more than the actual words. How might the interpretation of these words be affected if one had the starting point of no gender restrictions?

The same is true with all the so-called restrictive passages. If one believes that the restrictions are just affirmations of what God established at creation, one would agree with the traditionalist. However, if one views hierarchical relationship as something that resulted from the sin of mankind, something that Christ came to redeem, one will interpret those restrictive passages accordingly.

¹⁵ Philippians 1:1, I Timothy 3:8,12-13

¹⁶ I Corinthians 3:5 – In the KJV, every use of the word by Paul is translated “minister” except the case of Phoebe in Romans 16

¹⁷ Joseph Henry Thayer A Greek-English Lexicon of the New testament (Milford MI: Mott Media, 1977) Pg. 549

¹⁸ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich A Greek-English Lexicon of the New testament (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1957) Pg. 726

¹⁹ Ibid. Pg 714, see also Thayer Pg. 539

Pentecost

A defining moment for the church is the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit. This event sets the tone for the church for ages to come, and interestingly enough, speaks loudly to the subject at hand. Gathered in the upper room were both men and women disciples, “waiting for the promise of the Father”. When the Holy Spirit fell, He fell upon both men and women. The Apostle Peter, in defining this event to the crowd, clearly pointed this out.

‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon my bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of my spirit and they shall prophesy...’ Acts 2:17-18

There are several keys to think about in this defining scripture. First, Joel’s prophecy, which Peter quotes, says “upon all mankind”. The context of this is change; something new has happened. The Spirit has come, and whereas before, one only got a glimpse of the Spirit’s life and it was upon a select few, now it is available to all. The “all” Peter talks about he then expounds. “Sons, daughters, young men, old men, bondslaves, both men and women”, these were categories of restrictions to those first century people. Unfortunately, they continue to be categories of restrictions today. Christ’s coming was to change all that. The long awaited day of the Spirit has come. The Spirit’s gifting says Peter is for all, regardless of race (a category Peter had yet to learn about), age, social class and gender.

The meaning of the coming of the Spirit in relation to these restrictions can be understood through an earlier passage of Scripture. In the book of Job, towards the end of

the book a young man by the name of Elihu is introduced. He apparently had been listening to the conversation between Job and his three friends and could hold his peace no longer. He speaks of the reason he waited, the restriction he felt.

‘I am young in years and you are old; therefore I was shy and afraid to tell you what I think. I thought that age should speak, and increased wisdom. But it is a spirit in man, and the breath of the almighty gives them understanding. The abundant in years may not be wise, nor may elders understand justice.’ Job 32:6-9

This passage reveals the common understanding of the people to whom Peter spoke. Normal social distinctions such as age, education, gender and race would dictate whether a person was worthy to be listened to. The Spirit however broke through those normal distinctions. He spoke through the weak, through the unexpected, through the young. A person does not earn or deserve the Spirit’s blessing and the resulting ministry; they are gifts that break through the normal social barriers (barriers caused by sin). Elihu’s revelation is a pattern in the Old Testament that foreshadowed the New Testament, a pattern that constantly gave glimpses of the coming age of the Spirit. The coming of the Spirit on Pentecost broke through social distinctions and God was glorified in using all mankind. Slave and free, old and young, men and women, all had access to the Spirit and His gifts. This was the age of the Spirit, the “New Age” of Christ that Peter was announcing. God had come to redeem His people and to fill them with the Spirit. All had equal access; all would be instruments in His hands. This is the beginning point for understanding the New testament, the overall truth and “lens” through which the teaching and practice of the Church is to be interpreted.

The Testimony of the Spirit

If all this were true, one would expect to find evidence for this new attitude, both in the New Testament and in Church history, which is exactly what one finds. In the New Testament, there is evidence of this new understanding being lived out in the church. Women received the same Pentecostal blessing that the men did, and had a significant role in the spread of the Gospel. In Acts, Saul, later to become the Apostle Paul, was given letters to drag off both men and women. Why, if women were silent and subordinate, would he bother about the women? Phillip the evangelist had daughters who were prophetesses²⁰, and a woman by the name of Priscilla was chiefly responsible for the training of a church leader named Apollos. It was in Mary's house that the believers gathered to pray for Peter when he was arrested²¹. Was Mary a house church leader? Women according to the New Testament, were leaders of house churches, and found significant roles of leadership in the church²².

In the New Testament, Paul calls several women “fellow workers”²³, a term that Gilbert Bilezikian says is used interchangeably with “apostle”, and Paul even addresses a woman as an apostle.

Since there existed some equivalency between the terms co-worker (“fellow worker”) and apostle, we might wonder if Paul would call a woman leader an “apostle.” The biblical text suggests a positive answer to this query, as Paul sends greetings in Rome to Andronicus and Junias, probably a husband-and-wife team of veteran missionaries, who are told to be “outstanding among the apostles” (Rom. 16:7).²⁴

²⁰ Acts 21:8-9

²¹ Acts 12:12

²² In addition to those already sighted, II John 1, 13

²³ Priscilla (Rom. 16:3), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3)

²⁴ Gilbert Bilezikian, Beyond Sex Roles (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985) Pg. 198

The New Testament evidence is quite clear that women were leaders in the early church and had significant roles of leadership. When one turns to post New Testament times, one can find similar evidence.

Christian art from first and second centuries depicts women performing various ministerial activities – administering the Lord’s Supper, teaching, baptizing, caring for the physical needs of the congregation and leading in public prayers... Church council records and tombstone epitaphs substantiate the presence of women bishops in the early church.²⁵

In addition, the early martyrs were women as well as men, a clear indication that the Roman Empire viewed these women as every bit a threat as men.

This is the testimony of the Spirit, a testimony that continues throughout church history. Women functioned as missionaries, instruments of revival, preachers and teachers, gifted by the Spirit. If the traditionalist had his or her way, all of these testimonies must be interpreted as aberrations and acts of disobedience to God’s written word, but the testimony of the Spirit cannot be dismissed so easily. When one studies church history, one finds oneself in the position of Peter and the early Jewish believers who when witnessing the outpouring of the Spirit upon Gentiles concluded, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” (Acts 10:47). If God so used women, and chose to give them gifts of teaching and leadership, how can we refuse to acknowledge them?

²⁵ Stanley J Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, Women in the Church (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1995) Pg. 39-40 see also Karen Jo Torjesen, When Women were Priests (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1993) Pg. 10

Closing Thoughts

The substance of the New Testament is the message that Jesus came to undo the works of sin, and create a new people, a people who are born of the Spirit and not subject to limitations based upon race, age, social status, or gender. Any restrictions carried into the church based upon these distinctions are part of the old order, the world that Jesus came to overcome. Leadership in the church should be based solely upon the Spirit's gifting and call, a spirituality that goes beyond worldly distinctions. Women as well as men can be used by God to further His Kingdom.

The First Timothy passage at the beginning of this paper then, must be looked at as instructions that were uniquely fitted to a problem that existed in Ephesus under Timothy's ministry. The key to understanding the passage is understanding the circumstances that brought forth these instructions. Indeed, misunderstanding this passage, one that contradicts so much practice of the New Testament church, is born of such ignorance. What seems clearly to point in one direction on the surface (if anything about that passage is clear), turns out not to be pointing there at all. Instinctively, the church knows this, because only the extreme traditionalist in our time practices a literal interpretation of this passage²⁶.

The church needs the unique gifts of all in order to adequately minister to the world. In one sense, complimentarians have it right. Men and women are different and their unique gifts suite them to compliment each other. Where they misjudge the difference is in the area of leadership. People are not better suited to lead simply because

²⁶ For further study of this passage, consult the excellent work by Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger I Suffer Not a Woman (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker book House, 1992)

they are one gender. “It is a Spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty...” (Job 32:8).

Rather than be seen as a threat to God’s order, the advances of women in our culture have given the church the ability to see another side of scripture, one that is more in touch with God’s will for men and women. For the sake of the gifted women among us, let us not miss the opportunity to respond to His voice.

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