Women in Ministry

By Matt Messner

There is much debate and discussion around the topic of women in ministry.

Discovering that a church has women pastors may lead to one of three responses:

- Some people are encouraged when they discover this.
- Some people feel that this is wrong, based on things they have been taught or read.
- Some people aren't sure what to think.

It is important for us to know what we believe and why we believe it. It is my hope that this paper will help address the questions pertaining to this sometimes divisive topic. This is a brief overview on this subject. To look at more extensive research, please consider the books in the bibliography.

Views of Women in Ministry

There are two general views regarding women's involvement in leadership in the church.

1. **Complementarian/Traditional**

   This view focuses on the complementary nature of men and women. It uses Genesis 2 and 3 (the stories of Adam and Eve, and the fall of man) as the starting point of their view, as well as 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in the New Testament. This view believes that in the Church, men are meant to lead, women are meant to follow. *Therefore women cannot be a pastor, probably cannot be an elder and possibly cannot be a teacher or a leader.* In this model women's primary ministry roles are with children and other women. Sometimes they are allowed to sing or teach, but never to preach. They are forced to make fine distinctions between who women can and cannot teach, and in what contexts.

   Complementarians do not see this view as sexist. They see it as being consistent with the Bible. They claim their position as one where men and women are of equal value, but with different roles.

   On a positive note, this view recognizes the differences between men and women and it affirms the complementary nature of marriage.

2. **Egalitarian**

This view has an emphasis on the equality of men and women. It is theologically based on Genesis 1:26-28 and Galatians 3:28. Egalitarians would say that women can do anything in the church that men do. Therefore, women can be pastors, women can be senior pastors of a staff, women can preach and women can hold any position in the church for which they are gifted and qualified.

Egalitarians believe that women in the church need to be empowered to be able to function in ministry with freedom, using their God given gifts while obeying God's calling on their lives.

There are also some who support the egalitarian position theologically but in practice women are limited in their opportunity to lead. This position is very conflicted and frustrating because statements are made but not supported. Promises are made but not fulfilled. Women in these scenarios feel the most frustrated and discriminated against. These women may feel taken advantage of and are given very limited opportunities to develop their skills in leadership. Mixed messages dominate in this position. The men that lead in these situations sometimes appear to be controlling, chauvinistic, and conflicted.

Women in the New Testament

It is my conviction that the basis for a proper view of women in ministry must be found in the Scripture. Consequently, we must carefully examine some important passages that are used as a basis for defending the different positions regarding women in ministry.

As we do this, some may be surprised to find that, *"According to the evidence of the New Testament, the exclusion of women from ecclesiastical ministry is neither in accord with the teaching or practice of Jesus, nor with that of the first century church. The New Testament presents the call of Jesus as universally inclusive…Both the call of Jesus to discipleship and the call to ministerial service in the early Church were universal. They were not restricted by sex, marital status, social class, race or nationality."* [1]

Perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of women in all offices of ministry has to do with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In Paul's lengthy discussion about spiritual gifts, he never indicates that some gifts are for men and other gifts are for women. Instead, Paul teaches that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to every Christian without regard for racial background, economic status or gender, and strictly as the Holy Spirit chooses (see 1 Cor. 12:11). ***Paul never distinguishes between "male gifts" and "female gifts" nor does he suggest differences in the way gifts should be exercised.***[2] This is true of both

[1] Ibid.
[2] Clouse, Bonnidell and Clouse, Robert G., ed. Women In Ministry: Four Views. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989. Pg. 191.

manifestation gifts and office gifts. Gifts frequently require speaking and teaching. This is true of prophesy, exhortation, tongues, interpretation of tongues, pastor, and teacher. Furthermore, Joel 2, fulfilled on the day of Pentecost and proclaimed by the apostle Peter in Acts 2, specifically affirms both men and women receiving the Spirit of God along with the ability to speak the word of God as part of the prophetic community of the Church.

In the New Testament we see women functioning as disciples, apostles, prophets, deacons, and preachers of the Good News.

Women were the first preachers of the good news of the resurrection of Jesus to the Christian community. (Matthew 28:7-8). Romans 16:1-2 describes Pheobe as a "servant" of the church of Corinth. This term could refer to a deacon. (diakonos). "Paul's use of the masculine term, diakonos not only suggests the existence of an order of women deacons, but also that the women were included in the same order as male deacons." [3] This term was used to refer to a person with administrative responsibility in the early church and even more often in reference to a minister of God's word, such as himself. Paul also calls her a helper, or patron, which would indicate that she owns a home in which the church meets and holds a position of honor.

Romans 16:3-16 includes references to several women. It lists twice as many men as women, but commends more than twice as many women as men.

- Prisca (Priscilla): -- a fellow minister with her husband, involved in the instruction of another minister, Apollos (Acts 18:26).
- Junias: a fellow apostle. A common feminine name. Romans 16:7 "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the **apostles**, and they were in Christ before I was." Junias is a woman. [4]
- Philippians 4:2 refers to Eudia and Syntyche who shared in the work of the gospel there "help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel."

There were women prophets in the New Testament church. (Philip's daughters, Acts 21:9). Others were described as proclaimers of the word, they presided in the celebration of the Lord's supper and were called fellow workers of Paul (Romans 16:3 Aquila and Priscilla. This usually referred to one who shares in preaching. 1 Thes. 3:2). Others served as deacons and still others functioned as evangelists. This is in spite of the fact that women were generally subordinate in the Jewish, Hellenstic and Roman societies of their day.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Tetlow, Elisabeth. Women and Ministry in the New Testament. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1980. Pg. 120.

The structure that kept women out of leadership in the church developed in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries. This structure was modeled after the Old Testament priesthood in which women were excluded from service. An overall view of the teachings of Paul reveal a progressive attitude about the roles of women in society as well as in ministry.

Summary Statement

"In the New Testament there were not ministries of men and women. There were only ministries of Jesus in which both men and women served…There is nothing inherent in the character of Christian ministry as it is presented in the writings of the New Testament which would give reason for the exclusion of women. On the contrary, the New Testament portrays Jesus treating women as equal human persons. It also portrays women and men serving side by side in the various ministries of the church."[5]

So why are women forbidden from teaching in the church? This view is complicated by a couple of passages of the New Testament. Let's examine the two key passages.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."

Explanation #1: A Quote and Refutation of the Corinthian Position

This view proposes that verses 34-35 are a quote of the Corinthian position, refuted in verse 36, "Did the word of God originate with you?" Some would say that the sarcastic tone of this verse (vs. 36) invalidates the Corinthian position which is actually being quoted in verses 34-35. This is a possibility, although there is not direct evidence that this is how Paul intended the passage to be read.

Explanation #2: Gender Segregated Services

Many have said that communication between the sexes was disruptive because the men and women sat on different sides of the congregation. Although many use this as an explanation, it has been refuted in the examination of the architecture of the synagogues and the homes that were used in the early church.

Explanation #3: A Digression Regarding a Specific Issue of Church Order.

Some would say that Paul is referring specifically to the one kind of speaking directly addressed in these verses; that of asking questions. It was common in the ancient world for hearers to interrupt teachers with questions, but it was considered rude if the

[5] Tetlow, Elisabeth. Women and Ministry in the New Testament. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1980. Pg. 131

questions reflected ignorance of the topic. Women were uneducated, and it is suggested that they were given a prohibition of silence as a short term solution, to end the disruptive questions. The men were told to instruct their wives at home, and therein gain instruction and education.

Contextual Notes

1 Corinthians 11:2-6 reveals that there was a problem in Corinth where women were casting off traditional veils and thereby apparently not honoring men in the church with the mutual respect taught in Eph. 5:21. Paul is not advocating total silence. This is plainly based on the fact that earlier, in the same letter, he expressed an expectancy that they would pray and prophesy publicly along with the men (please see 1 Corinthians 11:4-5). Therein he had spoken of a proper way for women to speak in the church. The only way of explaining this is to understand that he is dealing with a specific type of speaking. Nothing here refers to teaching. ***A literal interpretation of this passage, carried to its natural conclusion, would exclude all forms of verbal communication, including singing and teaching Sunday School. "If we insist on a literal, legalistic interpretation, let us then eliminate all women teachers in Sunday School, Bible School, and in schools and churches on the mission field."***[6] Why would it be wrong to have women teaching the adults, but O.K. to have them teaching children? There is no reference here to age. If it is "potentially dangerous" to have women teaching adults, we should in fact be even more careful with our impressionable children.

1 Timothy 2:11-12

"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."

Explanation #1: Better Translation

"take/have authority": This rare Greek term is translated in the NIV as meaning to "have authority". This would mean women are not allowed to have any authority in the church. Other scholars say that this is a stronger term and could accurately be translated as meaning to "seize authority." Some would even translate this phrase as meaning to "domineer in a inappropriate way."[7]

This would forbid women from "teach(ing) in such a way as to take authority." This is an explanation that changes the meaning of the passage.

With this explanation, Paul is simply stating that he forbids women from grabbing and usurping authority, as he would have also forbidden any man. There were many power struggles going on in the early church, especially with the influence of false teaching.

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[6] Maxwell, L.E. Women in Ministry. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987. Pg. 100.
[7] Hawthorne, Gerald F. and Reid, Daniel G. Dictionary of Paul and His Letters. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993. Pg. 591.

Paul is likely dealing with a problem in this church. Apparently some women were involved in this insurrection of power.

Explanation #2: Social Situation
There clearly is a specific situation being addressed which was known by Paul and the readers even though it isn't explained in the text. 1 Timothy speaks of male false teachers causing problems in the church (1:20, 2 Timothy 2:17). They have introduced dangerous heresies into the Ephesian Church. These false teachers were influencing the uneducated women with their destructive doctrines. If these women had seized authority within the church, they would have injured the church's witness. In response to this specific problem, Paul calls for specific action. He tells them that they are not to take positions of authority in the church. At the same time he encourages them to learn "in quietness and submission". It is not hard to imagine how this problem could have developed with this group of new believers and how Paul's response was appropriate.

Paul's further reference to Adam and Eve complicates this issue. Is this reference the basis of his point, or a "ad hoc argument to support it."[8] Is he saying that all women are more easily deceived than all men? Or, is Paul using Eve as an illustration, to the Ephesian women about the danger that they have fallen into, of being deceived as untrained new believers? In 2 Cor. 11:3, Paul uses Eve as an example of anyone, male or female, who is deceived. Another interesting study that sheds light on the immediate cultural situation is to look at the Gnostic teachings regarding women. These specific teachings glorified Eve (and women in general) as the one possessing superior wisdom because she ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This verse is used by Paul to expunge that teaching.

As people of the Bible, we need to examine the specific context of specific passages of Scripture, while also considering the totality of the revelation of the word of God.

The Foursquare Church

The denomination that I am a part of was founded by a woman. During the 1920s to the early 1940s Aimee Semple McPherson preached to huge crowds around the United States and in Canada. She regularly preached 21 times each week at Angelus Temple (the church that she started). The revivals that she led were characterized by salvations, dramatic healings, and the manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit. She ended up founding and pastoring a church (Angelus Temple) in Los Angeles that ministered to well over 10,000 people each week. The ministry there included a Bible College and the first Christian radio station. She was unconventional and very popular. Besides being a woman, but she also did not fit the legalist mold common to the Pentecostals of her day

[8] Ibid.

(she wore makeup, had short hair, and she had experienced the tragedy of divorce). She was famous for her use of elaborate dramatic presentations and illustrated sermons in her communication. She had no intention of starting a denomination, but as people responded to the Gospel and were discipled and trained, new churches began being planted. Originally the number of women pastors in Foursquare was quite high. Three-fourths of the institute's first students were women. Fourteen of the first sixteen graduates were women. The dean of the college was a woman. Currently one third of all active credentialed Foursquare ministers are women.[9] Sister McPherson (as she was called) didn't spend much time defending her position of leadership as a woman. Her ministry was motivated by a deep sense of personal calling ("God has called me to preach this message."). She frequently made reference to Joel 2:28-29, as well as the example of other women in the Bible. She did not feel that it was necessary to defend her position, since she was convinced that she was merely obeying God.

This is consistent with the position stated by the Foursquare Church in their 1975 official organization statement written for, "Women In Public Ministry".

> *A close study of the Word of God, both Old and New Testament, indicates that God has seen fit to use women in His service in virtually every way He has employed men.*
> *We, therefore, see nothing that should restrict God-ordained and Spirit-filled ministry of women in any capacity or office of the Church in keeping with the Word of God which guides men and women alike.*

A 1988 declaration was unanimously passed by the Board of Directors. It reads:

> *The present and historical position of the Foursquare Church affirms the biblical truth that women are called of God to a role of leadership and public ministry. We hereby reaffirm and encourage the ministry of women throughout the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.*[10]

Current/Personal Ramifications

This subject has been a source of division within the church (at large). Some churches today continue to prohibit women from pastoring. We need to remember to be accepting of one another in spite of our different interpretations or positions. The subject of "women in ministry" is argued both ways. We are called to glorify God by being united in Christ, not arguing over our differences. Those who agree with the egalitarian position must learn to explain their position and not hesitate to release gifted women to serve within the church. Good leadership is not based on the gender of the

[9] Women in Leadership Ministry: *A Position Statement for the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel*. International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Los Angeles, CA 1998.
[10] Ibid.

leader. All other factors must be the primary considerations (e.g.: training, experience, calling, giftedness, spiritual gifting, health of their marriage, character issues, etc.).

I feel that it is urgent for the entire Body of Christ to be fully empowered and released in their gifts. We need Spirit filled men and women freely released in ministry in order for Jesus to be fully seen in our world today.

For further study, please consider the resources in the Bibliography. I studied at Fuller Theological Seminary under Dr. Philip Payne, and I highly recommend his book.

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