

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

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I sat diagonally opposite a spry lady at the after-service tea, who announced that she was ninety-four years old. She shared with us how, when in her teens, she was converted through the outdoor preaching of two women. These same two had founded the church in whose building we were sitting; a plaque on the wall was to their memory.

The conversation reminded me of another, in which the ministry of a female Anglican curate impressed a certain couple. After enthusing about her success in personal evangelism, they added, “And who are we to say she is wrong?” The implication being that if the Lord makes her a blessing, we must not criticise her position lest we find ourselves speaking against God.

Historically, evangelicals have viewed women preaching or occupying church office as a curiosity. It was confined to exceptional cases and to certain bodies like the Salvation Army, Methodism and others. Certain Baptist churches might have female deacons. However, for the most part, churches knew what they believed on this point and were not coy about saying so. Most noteworthy in this have been the Brethren Assemblies.

However, these days not all is so clear-cut. We hear of professedly reformed church services in which a woman will sometimes read the Scriptures. Or a minister’s wife will officiate in some public way in a mixed congregation. Even teenage girls take part in “Christmas Carol services” - either singing, or giving a Bible reading. Last year a large Grace Baptist church advertised that a woman was to preach on Mothering Sunday morning. These innovations would never have happened a generation or two ago. Even in churches where women outnumbered men, never was their role envisaged as holding office or teaching when men were present.

Unless things change for the better, this trend will continue and the role of women in the church will become more prominent, pervasive, and problematic. This will raise all kinds of controversies, and will further divide the churches of Christ. Moreover, it might land us in trouble with an increasingly intrusive government and its demands for “equality and diversity.” It is therefore necessary to examine afresh what God has revealed in His word concerning this important matter.

1. The issue is related to the Charismatic Movement

With its roots in the Montanism of the 2nd century AD, then the Irvingites of the early 19th century, it appeared at the turn of the 20th century as Pentecostalism. Historians show clear links with the 1904,05 Welsh Revival, then to Frank Bartleman and the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, then to Charles Parham and Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas.

In each one of these, women played a prominent part. The Welsh revival saw females in Evan Roberts’ meetings publicly singing, testifying and exhorting. A 1907 photograph of the leaders of the Azusa Street Mission shows men outnumbered by women seven to five, with the claim, “it allowed men, women, and children to celebrate their unity in Christ and participate as led by the Spirit”. And in Parham’s Topeka Bible School, Agnes Ozman spoke in tongues on January 1, 1901 – the first woman in North

America to do so. Parham, who afterwards experienced the same, is seen as the founder of the Pentecostal movement.

The “Charismatic Renewal” is usually dated from 3 April 1960. This was when Father Dennis Bennett, an Episcopal priest at St. Mark’s Church, Van Nuys, California, announced that he had been baptised in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Spreading to the UK, it sent shock waves through the already troubled evangelicalism of that time. Again, however, a striking feature was the place it gave to women.

An apologist for this, Richard M. Riss, makes it like a roll-call,

“A few of the women working as Pentecostal pastors during the charismatic movement of the 1960s and 1970s included Charlotte Baker, Myrtle D. Beall, Helen Beard, Aimee Cortese, Sue Curran, B. Maureen Gaglardi, Anne Giminez, Ione Glaeser, Hattie Hammond, Alpha A. Henson, Marilyn Hickey, Violet Kitley, Janet Kreis, Freda Lindsay, Fuchsia T. Pickett, Iverna Tompkins, and Rachel Titus. A sampling of a few of the other women who were vital during the time of the charismatic movement as speakers, authors, or evangelists, would include Eleanor and Roberta Armstrong, Rita Bennett, Edith Blumhofer, Hazel Bonawitz, Roxanne Brant, Mary Ann Brown, Shirley Carpenter, Jean Darnall, Josephine Massynberde Ford, Katie Fortune, Shirlee Green, Nina Harris, Sue Malachuk, Daisy Osborn, Dorothy Ranaghan, Agnes Sanford, Gwen Shaw, Bernice Smith, Ruth Carter Stapleton, Jean Stone ...”

The best-known example is Kathryn Kuhlman. Her ministry began in 1923, being “pastor” of Denver Revival Tabernacle for three years, and then went to Franklin, Pennsylvania, as a preacher and radio evangelist. Her “miracles” meetings began in 1947. In the words of Richard M. Riss, quoted above, “she gained a reputation as one of the world’s outstanding healing evangelists, carrying on as a leading figure during the charismatic movement until her death in 1976.”

Here is the testimony of another female charismatic, Betty Miller. This extract is from her book *Neither Male nor Female*,

“My own personal call to the ministry came as a surprise to me. I was not expecting the Lord to use me because I did not realise God used women in the ministry ... After my baptism in the Holy Spirit, I found I had a new holy boldness that I had not had before. I found myself witnessing and sharing with all who would listen ... I did not intend to pursue the path of becoming a female preacher. (I really did not know such existed). I just found myself sharing and preaching ... (The Lord) then ministered to me in a beautiful way to show me in His Word that it was Scriptural for women to minister.”

The charismatic movement, as is clear from these examples, is adrift from Scripture and governed by subjectivism. It has penetrated evangelical and reformed churches to an astonishing degree. Elements like worship leaders, music bands, torrents of catchy songs, casual and even jocular services, etc. can be found in many formerly serious and godly churches. Yet this other feature of the movement - females occupying leadership and teaching positions – is part of the same error and delusion. Churches who also adopt this public role for women should know where it comes from – and where it probably will lead them.

2. Feminism is another source for this innovation.

With its absolute equality of the sexes, the movement denies that gender should shape a person's identity, or roles in marriage and society, or employment opportunities. Its seismic effect in the last few decades has changed almost everything, even making gender-neutral language the norm.

The movement dates from the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. It found a prominent advocate in John Stuart Mill, an enemy of Christianity who called it, "a particularly pernicious superstition that fostered indifference or hostility to human happiness." In 1869 he published *The Subjection of Women*, to demonstrate that "the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong ... and ... one of the chief hindrances to human improvement."

Given this godless pedigree, how ironic that the professing church succumbed to feminism in November 1992, with the ordination of women to the Anglican priesthood. As the Church of England General Synod passed the legislation, there were jubilant scenes among supporters outside Church House. The ordination of women began in March 1994. By the year 2000, about 1,700 women were working as Anglican priests. The debate has now moved on to whether women should become bishops.

Yet now even some nonconformist churches are giving the pulpit to women. We see a revealing connection here. The charismatic movement has always had a usurped place for women. And where did this come from? In its setting aside the Scriptures, it has subjectively absorbed elements of militant feminism. The charismatic movement has the feminist agenda in its practices. Is it not so then, that churches that include such innovations, supposedly to appeal to the world, have in fact capitulated to its agenda?! Gender-neutral Bible translations like the Today's New International Version are another example of this sinful downgrade. Churches that allow women into their pulpits allow more than they realise.

3. The biblical teaching on this is clear.

To understand this we need to understand the role of women in relation to men. Whenever our Lord and the biblical writers discuss this, they always go back to the book of Genesis and the creation order. This is clear from the following examples.

a] Respective roles in marriage.

Ephesians 5:22-33, where after likening a husband's headship and wife's submission to that of Christ and His church, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 and says, "see that she reverence her husband." The profound differences of role and function then, are not cultural but creational. As we shall see, this should be also reflected in the Church of God.

Peter (1 Peter 3:7) describes the wife as "the weaker vessel." This has Genesis 2:7,8 as its background, where God formed Adam from the dust of the ground. The apostle does not call the wife the *weak* vessel but "weaker" – husband and wife are both frail (Job 33:6 "I also am formed out of the clay") but the wife more so, weaker constitutionally than the man. This entitles her to considerate treatment from her husband, who is the administrative and spiritual head. Nevertheless, she is to be "in subjection" to him (verse 1). God made Adam for physical labour and leadership; God made Eve from his side to need him, and support him in this – her weakness is his strength. And in the

church, the man's greater strengths are a reason why authority and leadership is given to him.

b] Covering the head in public worship

In 1 Corinthians 11:3-10 the rationale for female's covering their heads in the assembly goes back to Adam and Eve. This is a disputed passage, and many are the arguments against the head covering. Often it is claimed that Paul is discussing a cultural matter time-limited to the 1st century AD. However, notice his appeal to the creation order in Genesis: "the head of the woman is the man" ... "the woman is the glory of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (verses 3,7,8,9). Then in verse 10 the apostle says, "*For this cause* (i.e. the creation order) ought the woman to have power on her head (i.e. a covering signifying being under the authority of the man).

Then comes the additional reason: "because of the angels" (cf Ephesians 3:10; 1 Peter 2:12). On this point Calvin says, "When, therefore, women venture upon such liberties, as to usurp for themselves the token of authority ... (and) uncover their heads, not only Christ, but all the angels too, will be witnesses of the outrage." The point is that neither creation nor angels are cultural! This is a timeless principle for the church of God.

Sadly, female head covering has all but disappeared in today's churches. And often those who teach this are mocked or accused of "legalism." However, is it not reasonable to ask if this decreasing symbol of female subordination is not related to the increasing practice of women ministering in services and meetings where men are present? When this sign of submission goes, submission goes in other areas as well.

c] Women being silent in the assembly

In 1 Corinthians 14:34,35 Paul commands that female worshippers "keep silence" for "it is not permitted unto them to speak" (verse 34). Then again he gives the reason, "they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law" (verse 34). Which law? Surely the original law given after the fall of man in Genesis 3:16 "and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

In addition, Paul forbids the interruption of the service by women asking questions (verse 35). Not only is public office or function not allowed women, but also their silence is to extend even to audible discussion of matters during the service – let it wait until the privacy of their homes. On these two verses, Albert Barnes has this important comment, "No rule in the New Testament is more positive than this; and however plausible may be the reasons which may be urged for disregarding it, and for suffering women to take part in conducting public worship, yet the authority of the apostle Paul is positive, and his meaning cannot be mistaken."

e] The office of teaching belongs to men.

1 Timothy 2:11-14 is the plainest passage on this subject, and yet how many are the attempts to reinvent it. The apostle, under divine inspiration, tells Timothy he must not allow a woman to declare divine truth to a gathered church: "I suffer not a woman to teach.." The reason being, it would "usurp authority over the man." However, the fundamental reason (back to creation and the Fall) is the priority of Adam's creation and the initiative the woman took in the original disobedience: "For Adam was first formed, then Eve ... but the woman being deceived was in the transgression."

4. Disobedience follows when scripture is not the authority.

Writing in 1992 on the debacle of women's ordination, Dr. David Samuel highlighted how epoch-making this decision was,

“(Before the event) one felt that the formularies of the Church were secure. Evangelicals ... could appeal to them ... that the official teaching of the Church was faithful to Scripture and inviolable. Now that is no longer the case. By an act of Synod the doctrine of the Church of England was deliberately changed and in a manner that contradicted the Word of God. The Church had set aside Scripture and its own Articles, there seemed no way back from that position” (*Bible League Quarterly*, No.377, pages 292,293).

This is also the danger for nonconformist churches who allow women to occupy pulpits in their services. If the teaching of God's word is not law in this matter, what is clear becomes confused and what is necessary becomes unwelcome. This is why there has been a *debate* about the issue in the first place. Before, what God has revealed was final. Now, with a lower view of Scripture, the matter is negotiable. Add in the charismatic movement and feminism, and we have a mix that will lead anybody astray on these matters if Scripture alone does not keep us.

Usually appeal is made to other scriptures where women feature in God's work. Some mention Miriam (Exodus 15:20) Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:9). However, scripture calls these “prophetesses,” an extraordinary office and ministry for their time. Such exceptions to male prophets can hardly be used to negate what God requires of ministers and preachers in the New Testament.

It will be said that a woman reading the Scriptures to a mixed congregation does not violate New Testament teaching on the woman's role in the church. However, the public reading of scripture is an ordinance in itself (2 Timothy 4:3; Revelation 1:3 note, “*he* that readeth”). The public reading of scripture belongs to the work of the ministry, 1 Corinthians 4:1 “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.” We no more find a female in the New Testament officiating in this way than in *preaching* the word.

The women at our Lord's tomb are sometimes cited: “And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead” (Matthew 28:7). These “first preachers of the resurrection” certainly remove the stigma of the Fall inherited from mother Eve. However, no “call to the ministry” is in these words. They are entrusted with bringing the disciples the best of news. This hardly constitutes them preachers in the formal sense.

Often Phebe is quoted, who “is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea” (Romans 16:1). “Servant” is *diakonos*, which in other places is translated “deacon” (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:12). However, if female deacons were in view, surely the original appointment in Acts 6:1-6 would have included females, whereas only men are chosen. The qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 clearly apply to men, since they must be “*the husbands* of one wife, etc.” (verse 12).

However, in 1 Timothy 3:11 “their wives” is literally “women.” Some maintain this must mean “deaconesses:” the Weymouth New Testament impudently renders it this way, and the “Feminist Bible,” the gender-neutral *Today's New International Version*

has the footnote: “Probably women who are deacons...” Moreover, when Paul mentions elders in verses 2-7 of this passage, he is silent about their wives. The argument says that woman cannot be elders, but they can be (at least) deacons.

However, this special pleading again forgets the precedent of Acts 6 – only men were chosen and approved by the apostles. The reason deacons’ wives are mentioned here is because they, unlike the elder’s wives, might serve alongside their husbands, especially where other females are involved. Such must be, like their deacon-husbands, of such a character as will only do good and not harm.

5. Women do not need office or teaching to have a vital role in the church.

Some years ago I gave a tribute at the funeral service of a much-loved Christian lady. A church member, devoted helper, Sunday School teacher, deacon’s wife – she was totally fulfilled in her calling. And she exemplified all that was scriptural about a woman’s role in the church. I can do no better than to adapt this to show that our womenfolk serve God and His church in ways that lead to incalculable blessing.

At a low and needy time in Israel, the Lord raised up a female judge, Deborah, and in Judges 5:7 she is called “a mother in Israel.” Deborah was a wife (Judges 4:4), and probably a mother to a family, but she was also a mother to the people of God. Some women are like this: such a blessing to the church that we can call them “mothers in Israel.” No better title springs to mind for this tribute to ——’s memory.

“Mother” is an emotive and endearing term. It awakens all kinds of warm and precious associations. These will be a fitting outline of what she meant to us all.

a] A mother represents tenderness, yet firmness.

We remember her immense capacity to love and sympathise with the Lord’s people. However, she was a woman who possessed firm convictions where many believers are weak today: on issues like keeping the Lord’s Day, separation from the world, Christians marrying unbelievers, false ecumenism and so on. ——’s was not a sentimental Christianity. She had a large heart but strong views: the ideal combination.

b] A mother should be a homemaker.

Of the home she made for her husband and children we were all witnesses. However, their home was not shut up and selfishly enjoyed. It was open to others generously and unstintingly. She freely gave hospitality, not just to close friends (which is easy to do), but to those in distress, the lonely, those who did not always “fit.” Needy people knew where they would find a welcome. On that last Day, she will hear those wonderful words from her Saviour, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

c] A mother is caring and thoughtful.

A church always has those who have a special claim upon our Christian love. “Comfort the feebleminded” writes the apostle, “support the weak, be patient toward all men” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). ——— did more than her share of this. Elderly ones, shut-ins, single people, widows were thought about with hospitality and visits. She never just “left it to others,” as is often done. If some sadness had overtaken, there would be flowers and a card on the doorstep. At other times, she would prove an excellent letter writer. Each was full of interesting news, replete with relevant Scriptures and words of encouragement. This caring thoughtfulness enriches and binds a church fellowship together (1 Corinthians 12:25).

d] A mother is committed.

True motherhood is commitment to husband and family for life. For ——— and her husband, to be Christians was to be disciples. Disciplined, self-denying dedication was their concern and it spoke to us all. Their commitment was to each other and the family first, rightly so. But then also to the church so cheerfully. In the Sunday School ——— was loved by all the children: she was *their* mother too. Also the other women in the church knew they had a warm and loyal friend in her. For ——— and the growing family, attendance at the services and meetings was not optional, but again, a matter of Christian commitment.

e] A mother is an example.

In Titus 2:3-5 the older women are exhorted to be “teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands.” All she stood for she exemplified in word and deed. In fact, the whole family has been to us a benchmark Christian home, one that has challenged and inspired us. ——— invested heavily in the family and in the Lord’s family, the church. We have all benefited.

——— is now the richer, but we are the poorer. The finest tribute with which we could honour her memory is for us all to strive, by God’s grace, to be like she was and carry on her good works. This is the message of her life to young girls growing up, younger women, and older women and to all of us. We can apply the words Deborah said of herself to ———: “until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel.”