

A Defense for Women in Credentialed Ministry

It has been the position of the Churches of God, General Conference that women can be ordained to serve in pastoral ministry and positions of leadership for over one hundred and fifty years. The first woman granted credentials by the West Pennsylvania Eldership was Martha Jane Beecher in 1859. Beecher received two licenses from West Pennsylvania. The first was an “exhorter’s license” (1859) and the second was a “preacher’s license (1864). She later moved to Iowa, where she preached for the Eldership in 1866, though she was not granted a license in Iowa until 1878. There is evidence that the Michigan Eldership licensed a woman in 1859 and another in 1868. Indiana licensed Elizabeth McColley in 1863. Illinois recognized Annie C. Newcomer in 1873.¹ Marilyn R. Kern notes that “by the turn of the century, at least thirty-four more women were licensed to preach in twelve Elderships.” But she includes the significant detail that “it would not be until 1923 that the East Pennsylvania Eldership would ordain its first woman.”²

Today we stand in a rich denominational history that has seen God use ordained women and men in remarkable ways for the sake of his kingdom. But beyond that, we believe we stand on a scriptural tradition that extends back through the time of the apostolic writers to the Old Testament and ancient Israel in which God has used ministers in various positions of leadership and gospel proclamation regardless of their biological sex. We do not ordain women for cultural reasons or according to the whim of shifting societal demands but rather because we believe that this is what the Bible has always taught. In keeping with the tradition of John Winebrenner who sought to teach from scripture alone, and because we believe the Bible is, “Our only rule for following Jesus in every aspect of our life,”³ it is important to make sure that our practice on this issue as with all others, lines up with God’s teaching in his word.

Biblical History

Throughout biblical history, scripture makes it clear that God has used women in leadership roles within the community of his people. Miriam is identified as a prophet in Exodus 15:20 as is Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20) who is consulted by Josiah’s servants in the days of Jeremiah. Likewise, Deborah engaged both in prophetic ministry and the leadership of Israel as a judge (Judges 4:4).⁴ The fact that examples of female leaders in the Old Testament are few and far between should not be surprising given the cultures these texts describe. What is remarkable is that there are examples to be found at all. This tells us that God was doing something within the community of faith which was strongly counter-cultural.

Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry (again going radically against the grain of culture) he welcomed female followers and included them among his disciples (Luke 8:2). Mary is not rebuked for sitting at the rabbi’s feet but indeed is commended for her learning (Luke 10:42). After the resurrection, it is the women who are instructed to tell the men, “He has been raised from the dead” (Matthew 28:7). It is also a woman “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:41)⁵ who declares the as yet unborn Jesus to be her “Lord” (Luke 1:43).

¹ The above information is taken from *Women in Ministry For the Churches of God, General Conference*, prepared by the CGGC Commission on Church Vocations in the early 1990s. Taken from cggc.org 01/17.24.

² Marilyn R. Kern, “Women in the Churches of God: the first fifty years,” *The Church Advocate*, January – May, 1977, pp. 7-11.

³ *We Believe*, p. 27.

⁴ Other biblical examples of female prophets include the wife of Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3), and in the New Testament Anna (Luke 2:36-38), and the four unmarried daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9).

⁵ All scriptural quotations are NRSV.

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, after the Holy Spirit fills the believers and anoints them to speak in tongues, Peter explains to the crowd that this is in fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29. He quotes these verses stating twice that filled with God's Spirit both men and women of all social standings shall prophecy as God anoints them. The importance of women disciples and teachers continues into the early days of the church. Priscilla is always mentioned alongside her husband Aquilla, but it is of note that she is often mentioned first.⁶ This includes when she and her husband encountered Apollos and, "took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately" (Acts 18:26). Phoebe is identified as a deacon (Rom 16:1), and a benefactor (Rom 16:2) and was likely the bearer of Paul's epistle to Rome entrusted both to read and explain its contents. Indeed Romans 16 as a whole is significant, as Paul mentions numerous women working alongside men as his co-workers in the faith. Junia (Rom 16:7), for example, is listed as a fellow prisoner with Paul and, "prominent among the apostles."⁷ Elsewhere in Paul's writing, Lois, and Eunice are listed as Timothy's physical and spiritual ancestors who passed on the faith to him (2 Tim. 1:5).

As we consider the inspiration of the Bible, it is significant to note that the prophetic words of women are preserved as scripture in both the Old Testament and New Testament (For example the words of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Mary in Luke 1:46-55). It seems inconsistent to suggest that the Holy Spirit-inspired, biblical pronouncements of women cannot be taught by their spiritual daughters. Furthermore, women often hosted New Testament churches in their houses. Beyond simply providing a space within which to meet, it is likely that these women played an active part in the leadership of these gatherings. We see this with the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), and likely Lydia (Acts 16:15). This is also likely what is meant by the reference to "Chloe's people" in 1 Corinthians 1:11.⁸

While it is recognized that none of these women are identified specifically as "pastors" it is worth noting that this word (the biblical word is "shepherd") is not used in the New Testament of specific men either. Timothy is commonly identified as the pastor of Ephesus when Paul writes to him but nowhere in Paul's letters is he identified as such. Rather, what we find is that Timothy is doing the work of shepherding, much as the women listed above were in their respective cities and ministry contexts.

Qualifications for Elders

While the qualifications for elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) are often used as passages to disqualify women from positions of ministry – "an elder must be married only once" (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6) the biblical expression is "a one-woman man" – it must be understood that this is a prohibition against polygamy and fornication rather than limiting the office to just one biological sex.⁹ Thus, today we could say (though it would have been unnecessary in the 1st century) "an elder must be a one-woman man, or a one-man woman". Indeed, to read this phrase overly literally and thus restrict women from this office would necessitate likewise restricting childless elders as well (see 1 Timothy 3:4; Titus 1:6). Furthermore, Paul instructs Timothy that an elder must "manage his

⁶ Aquilla is mentioned first in Acts 18:2 and 1 Corinthians 16:19 while Priscilla is mentioned first in Acts 18:18; 26, Romans 16:3, and 2 Timothy 4:19.

⁷ There is a long interpretive history of trying to discount Junia, either by changing her name to the male version Junias (a name that does not appear anywhere else in the extant literature), or by saying that she was esteemed *by* the apostles but wasn't actually one of them. There seems to be no reason however for not reading Paul's commendation here in its most straightforward sense.

⁸ Priscilla and her husband mentioned above also hosted churches in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19) and Rome (Romans 16:3-5).

⁹ Thus, the NRSV translation "married only once" refers to being married to only one person at a time. This is not a prohibition against (or even addressing) divorced elders or elders who have remarried after their spouse has died.

own household well” (1 Timothy 3:4), a task that he will later assign specifically to women in 1 Timothy 5:14 and again in Titus 2:5.¹⁰ It should be noted that the male pronouns in many English translations of these passages are absent in the Greek and there is nothing in the grammar here to suggest one sex over another. Indeed 1 Timothy 3 begins, “*Whoever* aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task” (emphasis added).

“Difficult” Passages

It is with this understanding then that we can approach passages of scripture that have often been read as limiting women’s gifting or ability for credentialed ministry.¹¹ These passages (far fewer than those which list women serving in leadership roles) are 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. It is safe to say that these passages cannot possibly mean that a woman should never speak in church or never teach a man in any setting as we have already encountered passages that refute such a claim. The question then becomes what was the situation of the day (and what are the parallels in today’s society?) in which a woman should not speak or teach? What we find is that 1 Corinthians 14 concerns orderly worship and seeks to avoid the kind of distraction and interruption that a woman might cause who was used to being excluded from temple worship but now found herself to be a full member of the Christian worshipping community. In the same way it would appear that the women of 1 Timothy 2 are being compared to Eve who was “deceived,” and no deceived person should teach.

1 Corinthians 14:34 calls upon women to be silent in the churches and yet three chapters earlier Paul has discussed women praying and prophesying within the congregation (11:5). So, we must understand that whatever prohibition Paul is giving in chapter 14 it is not all inclusive. Verse 35 sheds light on this as we see that the talking which is being discussed concerns asking questions. There is a proper time for asking questions Paul explains, but it is not during the worship service. This fits within the larger context of 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 in which Paul concludes, “all things should be done decently and in order.” While much has been said concerning the seating arrangement of the early churches – were women shouting across the aisle to their husbands? – or the newfound freedoms of women in the church – are they chatting excitedly with their friends? (unlikely given the context of asking questions of their husbands) – ultimately, we don’t need to know exactly what was going on in Corinth specifically to know that Paul’s primary concern is that the speaking that does take place by both men and women is not distracting to the gathering of God’s people.¹²

1 Timothy 2:8-15 is widely recognized to be one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the New Testament. It is a generally accepted hermeneutical practice that difficult passages should be interpreted in light of clearer passages and that theological systems or beliefs should not be based upon an interpretation of difficult passages alone. Unfortunately, that is exactly what often happens with this text. In verse 12 Paul says that a woman is to “keep silent” and is not “to teach or to have authority over a man.” It is of note that in verse 9 women are also instructed not to braid their hair or wear gold or pearls. It would be a questionable hermeneutical practice to say that verse 12 is to

¹⁰ As a side note, it could be argued that Paul wanted Timothy and Titus to limit their searches for elders in Ephesus and Crete respectively to men because of the culture and connotations of the day. In this way it might be compared to Timothy’s own circumcision, not necessary theologically, but necessary so that the word of God might not be hindered from reaching those stuck in their cultural thinking. But even this is probably unnecessary speculation.

¹¹ It is of note that when Paul lists spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, he does not mention these gifts as being gender bound. The same is true of the “office gifts” in Ephesians 4:11-13.

¹² It is of note that due to the various placement of these verses in ancient manuscripts, and the fact that they seem to interrupt the flow of thought from verse 33 to verse 37, Gordon Fee believes them to be a later addition. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) p. 699.

be taken literally while verse 9 may be interpreted figuratively without explaining why such a dramatic shift has taken place. Furthermore, Paul ends this difficult section by saying that a woman “will be saved through childbearing” (2:15) and so clearly interpretation must be done beyond taking this passage at its most literal meaning.

The two keys which become most helpful to understanding this passage are given in verses 12 and 14. In verse 12, Paul’s instruction, as already mentioned, is that a woman is not to teach or to have “authority over” a man. It is quite possible that these two instructions are actually one, “Teach with authority.” This word “authority” appears nowhere else in scripture and is probably best translated as “domineer” a position and attitude that has no place within the household of God. If women were domineering men in Ephesus, it would explain why Paul is stepping in to offer correction here. In verse 14 then, Paul takes his readers back to the Edenic narrative of Genesis 1-3 and reminds his readers that Eve was “deceived.” It would appear that the women of Ephesus are likewise deceived, and if so, it would explain why Paul would not want them in teaching positions. Had this been a problem among the men of Timothy’s church it is likely Paul would have added, “I am not permitting a deceived man to teach either!”¹³ Ultimately a takeaway from these verses that should not be missed is that Paul commands in verse 11 “Let a woman learn,” an exhortation that is fully in line with the freedoms given to women throughout scripture.

Ultimately it is important for all of us, regardless of where we land on issues such as this one, that we do not come to scripture with our theology already worked out and force all texts to conform. Rather we must have the humility to sit under scripture, to be informed by it and allow God’s word to speak to us. God has spoken to us! He has spoken through men and women and has preserved his word for us so that we might listen, “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13). This means that we must also ask how we can work with brothers and sisters across the theological divide to strive together for the unity that is found only in Christ.

¹³ Much work has been done suggesting that the deceived women of 1 Timothy 2 either were uneducated and thus ignorant or were converts from the Cult of Artemis and were used to domineering men as part of their religious experience. While these are both likely scenarios, we must remember that Paul is less concerned with the specific deception of these women but more focused on the general rule that one who is deceived should not be instructing others.