

We offer this sermon from Pastor Howard Olver as an example of how our understanding of this issue where faithful Christians differ can be dealt with in the context of worship. Of course, there are other issues and biblical texts which need to be considered. See our position paper on "Women in Ministry" at http://www.fmc-canada.org/who/scod_pages/women-in-ministry.html.

THE WOMEN OF ACTS ACTS 9:36-42

Introduction

There are many issues that divide our society today that involve the church, besides being fans of the Ottawa Senators, Montreal Canadians, or Toronto Maple Leafs, and all of us now need healing for damaged emotions. Perhaps the most prominent is the issue of same sex marriages. There are other issues that are only divisive in the church. One of those is the role of women in church leadership and ministry. There are still many churches and denominations that do not allow women to hold meaningful positions of leadership. I'm afraid the culture around us looks at that and chalks it up as one more proof that the church is clueless and irrelevant.

I feel led to address this issue on Mothers Day when we celebrate the significance of women in our lives. Some people might question my timing. "*Why cloud a sentimental celebration such as Mothers Day with controversy?*" My answer is that this is precisely the appropriate time for the church to publicly affirm the equal status of women in the church and their role in church leadership and ministry.

Those of you who are new to Kingsview Free Methodist Church might be interested to know that the Methodist tradition to which we belong has historically supported equal status of women with men in church leadership. This summer marks the 200th Anniversary of the death of Barbara Heck, counted as one of the founders of Canadian Methodism, and a woman of great faith and vision. The Free Methodist Church, of which we are a part, has provided for the ordination of women since the beginning of the denomination.

But what does the Bible say about women and their role in the church? There is certainly room for discussion. There are verses in the New Testament that seem to indicate a different role for women in the church than for men, some would even say a subservient role. One of the most frequently quoted verses is 1 Corinthians 14:34, "*Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says.*" But that verse

has to be understood in its context, verses 33 and 35, *“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the other churches. Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says. If they have any questions to ask, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is improper for women to speak in church meetings.”*

The Apostle Paul was addressing the issue of order in the church service. In a time when few women had any formal education, and women sat on one side of the church while men sat on the other side, wives would at times disrupt the service by asking their husbands to explain what was being said. Paul is not talking about the involvement of women in worship, which was accepted without question, as we are going to see, he was talking about maintaining proper order in the worship service. No church today enforces the rule about women not speaking in church. Women talk wherever and whenever they want to. And besides, today it's usually the men who are asking their wives to explain what's going on.

The Women of Acts

I do not mean to make light of a serious issue for careful biblical study. There also are other Scripture texts that address the issue of the role of women in church leadership but after looking at them carefully, I am convinced all of them are speaking to specific cultural issues and specific times and places. On the other hand, I find numerous examples of women who were accepted and affirmed in the New Testament Church.

The story of Dorcas, found in Acts 9:36-42, is typical of what I am talking about.

There was a disciple in Joppa named Tabitha (which in Greek is Dorcas). She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor. About this time she became ill and died. Her friends prepared her for burial and laid her in an upstairs room. But they had heard that Peter was nearby at Lydda, so they sent two men to beg him, “Please come as soon as possible!”

So Peter returned with them; and as soon as he arrived, they took him to the upstairs room. The room was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other garments Dorcas had made for them. But Peter asked them all to leave the room; then he knelt and prayed. Turning to the body he said, “Get up, Tabitha.” And she opened her eyes! When she saw Peter, she sat up! He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then he called in the widows and all the believers, and he showed them that she was alive. The news raced through the whole town, and many believed in the Lord.

I wish we knew more about Dorcas because she must have been a very special woman. We know she was active in a compassion ministry to widows and other people in need. And evidently she was part of the church planting team in Joppa. Her sudden illness and death had such an impact on the church and community that they sent two men to find Peter to beg him to come pray for her. But perhaps the most important statement in this text is that Dorcas was a disciple of Jesus. She was not just a woman; she was a disciple, an intentional follower of Jesus Christ. What higher calling can there be?

Actually, there are many examples in the New Testament of women like Dorcas who were accepted as leaders in the early church. I'm going to point out just a couple examples in the Book of Acts because that is the focus of our study.

Lydia, in Acts 16, was Paul's first convert in Thyatira and hosted the first house church in Thyatira in her house. Lydia was also a business woman, an importer/exporter of textiles.

The Apostle Paul describes Priscilla and Aquila as ***“co-workers in my ministry for Christ Jesus.”*** It is interesting to note that contrary to custom, Priscilla is always named first. Is that a clue as to her importance in ministry? In Acts 18, Priscilla and Aquila hear a young man named Apollos preaching in the synagogue, recognize he is very gifted but uneducated in the faith, so they take him home and tutor him in the Christian faith.

In Acts 21, Philip, the Senior Pastor of the church in Caesarea, one of the first seven deacons appointed in Acts 6, had four daughters, all of whom had the gift of prophecy – so much for women remaining silent in church.

Equal Before God

All of these examples, however, are secondary to one primary Biblical truth; everyone is equal in the sight of God. Galatians 3:26-28 states it clearly, ***“you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have been made like him. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians – you are one in Christ Jesus.”***

Jesus is absolutely remarkable in his treatment of women. As we read through the Gospels, we find Jesus breaking almost every cultural taboo, beginning with the way in which he talked with the Samaritan woman at the well. B.T. Roberts, regarded as the founder of the Free Methodist Church, had strong thoughts on this.

“In all that we have heard and read against the right of women to be, in the fullest sense, a minister of the Gospel, we have never heard or read a single quotation from the words of Jesus against this right. This is significant. Christ applied the same rules of moral conduct to the woman as to the man. His treatment of the woman taken in adultery has scarcely a parallel. No woman who ever came to him was repulsed.”

If Jesus sets a new standard for the treatment of women, the Day of Pentecost marks full equality of women in the life of the church. In Acts 2:17-18, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is described as entering both men and women. Peter quotes the prophet Joel: ***“In the last days, God said, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit upon all my servants, men and women alike, and they will prophesy.”***

Limiting the role of women in church leadership and ministry is based on a hierarchical view of the church. But we don't find that view in Scripture. Instead we find the head of the church is Jesus Christ, and we are all one in him. When God says that everyone is equal in his sight and when he gives his Holy Spirit to men and women alike then I think the church needs to be very careful tampering with God's principles.

So what is all of this saying to us today? What is the good word that we can take home with us on this Mothers Day?

- ▶ First, we are all equal in the sight of God, and he loves each one of us so much he gave his Son to die on the cross in order to redeem every one of us.
- ▶ Second, God gives His Holy Spirit to every person who puts their faith in Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Third, through his Holy Spirit, God gives gifts for service and ministry to every Christian.
- ▶ Fourth, God calls every Christian to use their gifts for building His church and advancing his kingdom.

All of this is based on our being disciples, followers of Jesus Christ, and not on whether we are ***Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, but because we are all Christians – we are one in Christ Jesus.***

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