

Wesleyan Perspectives on Women in Ministry

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This presentation was created to address a need in Free Methodist churches for education about the ordination and placement of women pastors in order that people in and out of the church might experience the salvation of God as preached and enacted by women pastors. In spite of our formal denominational stance, which is to ordain women as elders and locate them, Free Methodist women face opposition from local congregations who have not resolved objections to women ministers. Many steps have been taken to ameliorate this problem, which is, to a significant degree, one of lack of education, exposure, and experience. One such step, this paper, requested by the Board of Bishops, was created to address objections, and answer questions regarding women pastors.

Those who resist women preaching and ministering often do so on the grounds of 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:12-15, which seem to restrict first century Corinthian and Ephesian women from conversing and teaching in the emerging church. However some of the Free Methodists among these are unaware of why their church ordains women. Like many Christians, they think the New Testament allows women to serve in all sorts of capacities in the church except that of senior pastor. Thus, a large part of the discussion below examines these passages.

Free Methodist churches claim the Wesleyan theological foundation for faith and practice. The term "Wesleyan" means a holistic methodology that widely embraces Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and evaluates the applicability of each point of the quadrilateral to present concerns, such as women in ministry. Thus, although the following includes examples of John Wesley's approach to Scripture and decision to encourage certain women to hold services and preach, it is not exclusively an examination of his view of women in ministry.

I begin, nonetheless, with Christ's affirmation of women and the unfolding practices of the Jesus movement and early church in this regard. I then discuss in some detail the New Testament passages used most often to restrict women from preaching the Gospel and baptizing converts: 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, using Reason, Experience, Tradition, and Scripture itself to interpret Scripture. I will turn to John Wesley's approach to women preaching and ordination in his day and conclude by presenting the arguments of B. T. Roberts, the founder of the Free Methodist church, who also tackles the "restrictive" New Testament passages, as well

as practical concerns, using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to effectively argue for the ordination and placement of women.

Jesus and Women

In this discussion of women in ministry, we must first recall the revolution God created by becoming incarnate in Jesus and by pouring out the Spirit of Christ indiscriminately on all flesh, male and female (Joel 2.28-32; Acts 2.17). According to the Gospels, Jesus taught, disciplined, touched, and healed women; he was himself cared for by women throughout his ministry; they followed him to the cross and to the tomb. Several of these women became apostles, sent by the risen Christ to tell his frightened, grieving friends in hiding that he had come back to life and to meet him in Galilee.¹ Jesus (especially in Luke) claimed an imminent reversal in cultural systems of hierarchy—the humble would be exalted, the mighty laid low.

Women were among the downtrodden and responded to Jesus' message and association with them. God's Spirit in Acts 2 descended upon women and men who began prophesying as the age of the immanence of God in the form of the Spirit dawned. Women were active in the earliest gatherings, including especially those forming around Paul.²

Women in Paul's Churches

Paul believed that the new age had begun to dawn with a new creation: those baptized in Christ must not be divided along social lines, but unified. Gal. 3.28 is a baptismal formula for all sorts of people as they enter the community of Christ. Women must have been relieved to learn that in Christ they were not incomplete and inferior to men.³ Although Paul preached that in Christ there was unity, he did not seek a social revolution such as freedom for slaves and

¹ Matt 27.55, Mark 7.24-30, 15.40-41, Luke 3.1-3, 23.49, John 4 and 20.

² E.g., Acts 16.1-15: Lydia: head of household and head of church. 1 Cor. 11.4-6: women prophesying. Romans 16: Phoebe, a deacon at Cenchreae carries a letter to Rome. Prisca, responsible with Aquila for Gentile mission and correcting Apollos, a teacher might in the Scriptures (Acts 18), supports a congregation in her home, Mary works among the Romans, Tryphanena, Tryphosa, Pirsis (coworkers for the gospel), Julia mother of Rufus, and Junia "foremost among the apostles." Philippians 4.2: Euodia and Syntyche. *Thecla*, a story of a celibate woman, seems to have drawn a fierce reaction against church from outsiders. Though fictional it shows women were drawn to chastity and freedom gospel offered.

³ In antiquity, people thought of men and women as different, not in kind, but in DEGREE. The male was the more fully developed human; the female was the less developed human. Women were born on their way to becoming men, thus they were imperfectly—only partially formed in the womb. Their lungs had not fully developed and their penises had not yet formed. What's more, their development, unlike that of adolescent boys, would NEVER be complete. Men were made to be penetrators and women penetrated; therefore this was additional proof of women's lower status and men's right to dominate. Thus, by their very nature, women were WEAKER VESSELS. See Bart Ehrman's *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 341-350.

equal opportunities for women. He saw differences between men and women reflected in the customary social roles (1 Cor. 11.3-16). Most importantly, time was short (1 Cor. 7.17)!

A passage often used to oppose women as senior pastors is 1 Cor 14.34-5.⁴ Some argue that this is not Paul's stance, but rather his opponents' argument that Paul repeats in order to refute. (Such method is his custom elsewhere, and there is no Scripture "law" that says women are not permitted to speak in the assembly).⁵ Others see vv 34-5 as an interpolation, since, in the earliest manuscripts, this section is found in different places throughout the narrative. If inserted into 1 Corinthians at a later point in the transmission process, it would reflect the accommodation to society's mores that is also reflected in the Pastoral Epistles, to be discussed below. Clearly, it is a change of subject, for if vv 34-5 were removed, there would be no break in the topic under discussion: order in prophesying. In any case, vv 34-5 advises women against *conversing and asking questions* in the churches; it says nothing against them prophesying, preaching, or praying, which obviously occurred without censure for under these circumstances they were to cover their heads (1 Cor 11.5,13).⁶

Although he attempted to enforce customs such as head coverings, in Paul's churches there was a clear movement toward equality that reflected Jesus' attitude toward women—openness to women and their gifts. However, there are marked differences between the early letters of Paul and the Pastoral Epistles. To help us understand these differences, we must look at the perspectives of people living in first century Greco-Roman culture where the weak were expected always to be subservient to the strong. For example, women were to be dominated socially and sexually by men. To be dominated and/or penetrated would indicate loss of honor. Women who spoke or displayed any authority in any public setting were thought to be unnatural. The women who did attain levels of authority, contrary to custom, were accused of not knowing their place, being sexual aggressors, shaming their husbands and families. But Christian churches were started in households, the domain of women. Thus, it was only natural that women would be involved and prominent in their formation and the spread of the gospel.

⁴ It is very important that the reader refer to the passages under discussion to follow my argument.

⁵ See Gilbert. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985).

⁶ The Greek term *laleo* usually translated "speak" means "converse." There are numerous Greek words for speak, but only *laleo* means converse. See further, John Bristow, *What Paul Really Said About Women*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988, 63-65; 49—66 for further discussion.

However, the inordinate number of women in the early churches was viewed as a weakness by the opponents of Christianity. Pagan writers criticized this movement and it appears such criticism affected later Christian writings, such as “the Pastoral Epistles.”⁷ The many defenders of the faith denied other accusations, but never this one.

Gradually, the church grew and took on a more public presence. More and more Gentiles were converted and their views on gender relations, thoroughly hierarchical, became influential. These views were called “natural.” Some interpreters of the Jewish Scriptures used them to support negative perceptions of women.⁸ For example, some Christians used Jesus and Paul as support for celibacy and/or equal participation for women in the church. But this was unpopular with others! In addition, it was obvious that celibates could never produce new generations of believers.

The Pastoral Epistles

Instead of urging people to remain unmarried (1 Cor 7.8), 1 Timothy 5.14 urges young widows to marry, bear children, and protect their modesty, which was “natural.” And, as it is usually translated and interpreted, 1 Timothy restricts women from teaching (1 Tim 2.12-15). I will discuss this passage further below. Ironically the groups which now ordain women are accused of accommodating to society, which, were it not for the clear precedent of the Gospels’ pictures of Jesus’ and Paul’s ministries, would be a valid point. But it is not to the credit of God’s people when they do not lead the way, but follow.

We are shaped by what we see and don't see; experience and don't experience. Even in churches like the Free Methodist, which affirms the ordination of women, the power of exposure, custom, or the lack thereof, etches deep marks in our inner beings. Some Free Methodists recall the female ministers they knew as a child. They remember and tell stories about them because they impacted lives. Nonetheless, most Christians are *accustomed* to male pastors. Women converse, teach, and ask questions in our churches all the time, but women pastors are not common. We associate pastoring with males because of our

⁷ In fact, the Christian church came under severe fire for the responsibilities women shouldered; see *Against Celcius*.

⁸ The earliest blaming of the woman for the humans’ disobedience in the Garden and extrapolating this to women in general is found in *Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)* 25.24 (second century B.C.E.). To trace interpretations in this regard, see *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, ed. Kristen Kvam, Linda Schearing, and Valarie Ziegler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

experience and yet we believe it is the New Testament that says women can do everything in the church except preach and pastor.

My transformative education, in this regard, began the day I attended a lecture by Dr. Gordon Fee in the summer of 1988 entitled "Women in Ministry." This New Testament scholar exposed 1 Tim 2.12-15 ("I don't allow women to teach. . . ") in the context of the concerns expressed throughout 1 and 2 Timothy about the church at Ephesus. Fee argued for the ordination of women, asserting that the words about women in 1 Timothy were applicable only to that time and place, but were not part of a church discipline manual created for all churches for all time. Plenty of evidence in the letters indicates that there were false teachers leading young widows astray in their own homes and teaching others these false doctrines.⁹

A Wesleyan approach to this issue summons reason and experience alongside of Scripture to ask: Do the conditions present in some of the earliest churches exist today? Are women in this part of the world today still uneducated, unruly, and new to the forum as they were in Corinth; are they young widows, vulnerable to false teachers who settle in their homes to teach false doctrines and proselytize others as they were in Ephesus? Experience answers, "No, these conditions do not exist here today." Reason concludes: "If the conditions do not exist, neither should the rules." In fact, this is how we treat most of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Do we insist on keeping the case laws found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers? What about the ritual for the wife of a jealous husband found in Numbers 5.14-31? Do we insist that women cover their heads because of the angels when they come to church to pray and prophesy as 1 Cor. 11 urges? Do all Christian women have long hair and all Christian men have short hair?. Do we enroll widows and provide for them as prescribed in 1 Timothy, the same epistle where the English translations indicate that the author prohibited women from teaching in general? Providing for the widows in local churches would be a humane practice, yet churches that jettison this insist on keeping the prohibition against women teachers—or rather, they distort the Greek understand it to mean no women preachers. In other words, they allow for women teachers, but prohibit women pastors and preachers. There are countless other examples of admonitions found in Scripture that that we glibly read over with no concern for making them normative

⁹ 1 Tim 1.3-7, 4.1-5, 7; 6.3-5.

Nonetheless, there is more that must be said about 1 Timothy 2.12-14, which is the primary Scripture appealed to by churches and individuals against preaching, teaching, and pastoring women. A Wesleyan approach to this issue first examines 1 Timothy 2.12-14 in its original language as Catherine and Richard Clark Kroeger have done.¹⁰ Following the Greek closely, they translate this passage: “I do not allow a woman to teach¹¹ that she was the author or originator of man,¹² but she is to be in conformity¹³ with the Scriptures. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ...” The Kroegers proceed to point out that this passage could be directed against a proto-Gnostic mythology glorifying Eve as the enlightener and savior who preceded man in creation and led him to knowledge of the high God through eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The man had been deceived into thinking he was made before Eve; it is this mythology the writer of 1 Timothy 2 attempted to refute.

A Wesleyan approach summons reason to ask, when examining 1 Tim. 2.12-15: "Does Genesis 2 teach woman should not teach because man was created before woman, or is the author countering this theme embedded in demi-urgical creation myths, that woman was created before man and enlightened him with knowledge of the high God through the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?"¹⁴ Clearly, in spite of a tradition of interpretation otherwise, the point of the Genesis 2 narrative is not who came first, or which is inferior, but that it is not good for humans to be alone, that God turned what was one and alone into two who became joyfully together, united in unashamed intimacy. One became two to solve the loneliness problem, then the two become one again and the first marriage was created.

Reason demands that we proceed to examine 1 Tim 2.15, which is normally translated: "But she will be saved through the childbearing, if they remain in faith and love and sanctification with good moral judgment." The antecedent for 'she' is the prototypical woman of

¹⁰ *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Tim. 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*, by Catherine and Richard Kroeger, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, especially chapter 16 and pp 171-177.

¹¹ *Didaskein* elsewhere refers to the content of teaching, never the activity of teaching.

¹² *Authentein*, usually translated “have authority over” means to dominate or to claim authorship and ownership. Kroeger shows that *authentein* was also used in the first century to mean murder or simulated murders in religious rituals (185).

¹³ *Hesuchia*, usually translated as “be silent” means harmony or conformity. The next reference is to Genesis 2.

¹⁴ A “demi-urge” is an evil “god” found in numerous documents in the Nag Hammadi library. Often associated with “Gnosticism,” these documents vary widely, except that most refer to the demi-urge as the creator of humanity and the material universe. This demi-urge was himself a mistake, misbegotten, and produced the decaying world, as well as mortal humanity, which, with each generation, founders farther away from the high god of enlightenment. See Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

verse 14, who was deceived—unlike the enlightened, original woman of the Nag Hammadi documents. Woman will be saved in the situation of bearing children—in spite of the warnings against marriage and childbirth by the false teachers who forbade marriage and childbirth (1 Tim 4.3, 5.14). The Kroegers, in writing *I Suffer Not a Woman . . .*, are right when they say that this means that bearing children precludes no one from salvation. This directly relates to the corollary admonition for young widows to marry and have children (1 Tim 5.14-15).

Reason, experience, and tradition all affirm that no one in the Pauline tradition would assert that women are saved *by means of* motherhood—salvation is by the grace and faithfulness of Christ. Women could certainly obtain salvation even though they are mothers. Women don't have to be celibate and childless in order to attain to salvation, as the false teachers were claiming. Salvation is for everyone, child bearer or not, who continues in faith, love, holiness, and good sense.¹⁵

Let us turn now to John Wesley's belief and practice in regards to women preachers. Wesley was a realist, a pragmatist, and a reasonable man whose opinions evolved over time and influenced his practice as he responded to his world and to the needs and gifts of those in his large parish.

John Wesley and Women Pastors

Initially Wesley denounced the Quaker practice of allowing women to preach to a church assembly, but in his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, he qualified the 1 Corinthian admonition that women be quiet by saying: "unless thy are under an extraordinary impulse of the Spirit." He observed the effectiveness of women speaking in the cells and he had to wrestle with the difference between women "exhorting" or "testifying" and "preaching."

Wesley was a reformer in regard to women in ministry. His assumption was that Paul forbade women preaching, but his experience demonstrated that women were some of the best preachers and pastors. He noticed that Paul's experience included women praying and prophesying in the church. Thus, at first Wesley encouraged women touched by God to "testify" and avoided the word "preach." Later he claimed the movement of God of his day was an extraordinary situation similar to the Acts 2 narrative where God was clearly no respecter of persons in pouring out the Spirit. He began encouraging women to preach in society meetings.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

At the end of his life, when he finally began to ordain ministers, he ordained two women. Sarah Mallet was an effective Methodist preacher whom Wesley advised as was Sarah Crosby who was a tireless itinerant preacher. Their success was aided by the backing and support of Wesley who believed that opposition to women in ministry decreased in his later years. But after he died opportunities for women to minister publicly quickly declined.¹⁶

It is ironic that the Free Methodist church has so few women pastors given that her founder, B. T. Roberts, argued for women ministers and wrote the compelling treatise, "Ordaining Women," 101 years ago. This document should be shared in its entirety with our churches, especially where the Bible has been used to thwart the present call of God on women. I will express only a few high points of his argument here, and urge any reader to purchase the book through Light and Life Communications.¹⁷

Addressing 1 Cor. 14.35-36, Roberts said:

There was disorder and confusion in the Corinthian church, all wishing to speak at once, to advance different views. Corinthian women were perhaps recent converts from heathenism, ignorant, incompetent. The text says women should learn in *quietness* not *silence* and doesn't apply to preaching at all, only to learning and the manner of learning. Paul rebuked these women not in their effort to preach, but in their effort to learn. This is a remedy for a specific difficulty, and to construe it against public efforts of competent and orderly female teachers... in the face of all the unanswerable proof that females did teach under divine sanction is doing violence to the word of God.

Roberts points out that all through out the epistles we have evidence that women did pray and prophesy (i.e. preach) and teach in the earliest churches (1 Cor. 6. 5, 6, 13, 14, 15; 11. 6; Phil 4.3, Ro 16 *passim* [Junia was an female apostle v 7], 2 Pet 3.15). Stating that the situation discussed in 1 Timothy 2.11-15 is similar to Corinthian situation where the church is composed of converts from heathenism, affirms:

¹⁶ Antifeminist prejudice hardened in the decades following Wesley's death and nineteenth century Methodism was far less liberal on this matter than Wesley had been." See Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, Daughters of the Church, (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987), 240.

¹⁷ Original Printing, 1891; reproduction, 1992, second printing 2003, (Indianapolis: Light and Life Communications. I am using the oldest version whose page numbers do not align with the recent publications. I am combining quotes from different pages that treat the same passage. Please refer to the book.

When a woman is properly authorized to teach, she does not usurp authority. The authority duly given her, she has the right to exercise in a proper manner and within the proper limits. If woman, in using her voice, in praising God, or declaring His truth, in your churches, is a transgressor, then silence her at whatever cost; if she is doing right then remove all shackles and give her the liberty of the Gospel. These are the only passages of the kind in the Bible. If a denomination applied these literally they would not allow singing, praying, testifying, teaching, or writing religious books.

Citing a letter by governor Pliny to the Roman Emperor, Trajan, dated about the year 107 C.E., which refers to the torture of two young women ministers of the Christian church, Roberts protests: "Women, it seems could be ministers of the church at this early age, while it was poor and persecuted, but afterwards, when it became rich and popular, they were set aside."

He answers an objection often raised against women ministers: "If women are to preach, why did [Christ] not choose a woman among the 12? We ask, if gentiles are to preach, why did he not choose a gentile among the 12?" After showing how woman's condition has been one of slavery in most were cultures, Roberts says: "Though Christianity has greatly ameliorated the condition of women, it has not secured for her, even in the most enlightened nations, that equality which the Gospel inculcates." Using the example of the enslavement of Africans which was SUPPORTED by many churches until finally made illegal, Roberts says: Roberts goes on to ask the world of his day:

If those ... who expressed the prevailing sentiment of their day were so greatly mistaken on a subject which we now think so plain that it does not admit of dispute, that every man has a right to freedom, is it not possible that the current sentiment as to the position which WOMAN should be permitted to occupy in the Church of Christ may also be wrong?"

Roberts noted that Wesley didn't regard ordination as bestowing on the ordinand a Christian, much less an angelic or godlike character. Ordination was necessary to prevent improper persons from thrusting themselves into ministry, and thus bringing the Gospel into contempt. The following are direct quotes from Robert's treatise.

Why then we repeat does not Christianity root out all false religions? And why does it not have a more marked effect upon the lives of those who acknowledge its truth? There must be a cause. The reason is that the vast majority of those *who embrace the Gospel are not permitted to labor according to their ability, for the spread of the Gospel*. . . . It is said that about two thirds of all the members of all the Protestant churches of this country are women. Yet in these churches a woman, no matter what may be her qualification, and devotion, and zeal, is not permitted to occupy the same position as a man. The superior must, sometimes, give place to the inferior. The bungler must give directions, the adept must obey. The incompetent coward must command. A Deborah may arise, but the churches, by their laws prohibit her from coming to the front. And these laws must be enforced though all others are disregarded. She suffers in consequence, but the cause of God suffers most. It is impossible to estimate the extent to which humanity has suffered by the unreasonable and unscriptural restriction which have been put upon women in the churches of Jesus Christ. Had they been given, since the days of the first Apostles, the same rights as men, this would be quite another world. Not only would the Gospel have been more generally diffused among mankind, but its influence, where its truth is acknowledged, would have been incomprehensibly greater. Our so-called Christian nations would have been more in harmony with the teachings of Christ, in their laws, their institutions and their practices. The great Command of Christ requires that they who make converts should be invested w/ authority to administer the sacrament of baptism. Woman must either be permitted to baptize, or she must not be permitted to make converts. . . .Men had better busy themselves in building up the temple of God, instead of employing their time in pushing from the scaffold their sisters, who are both able and willing to work w/ them side by side. Reason and grace should serve to overcome prejudice. Christian men and women should not wait until a righteous cause is popular before they give it their influence. Those who do, are simply following fashion, while they may think they are following the Lord. It is not enough to say the right will ultimately triumph; if we claim to be righteous we should help make the right triumph.

Finally Roberts cites Gal. 3.28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

We must understand Gal. 3.28 to teach, as it actually does, the perfect equality of all, under the Gospel, in rights and privileges, w/out respect to nationality, condition, or sex. It cannot apply only to salvation or the female would not have been mentioned, for all regarded women as included in the general provisions of salvation of humankind, though all (like Peter) did not regard Greeks and slaves in these provisions from the outset.

On the subject of Galatians 3.28 a sermon by Rev. Luther Lee preached at ordination of Miss Antoinette Brown 9-15-1853 in NY is also enlightening.

I cannot see how text can be explained so as to exclude females from any right, office, work, privilege, or immunity which males enjoy, hold or perform. If the text means anything, it means that males and females are equal in rights, privileges, and responsibilities on the Christian platform. If I deny her the right to exercise her gifts as a Christian minister, I virtually affirm that there is male and female, and that we are not all one in Christ Jesus, by which I shall contradict St. Paul..." If males may belong to a Christian church, so may females; if male members may vote in the church, so may females. If males may preach the gospel, so may females; and if males may receive ordination by the imposition of hands, so may females. The reason being Gal. 3.28.

To conclude this article I concur with the conclusion reached by B.T. Roberts who said: "Then we conclude that there is nothing in the creation of woman or in her condition under the law which proves that no woman should be ordained as a minister of the Gospel."

I say if women may be ordained they must be given churches or their ordination, their call, their training, their gifts mean nothing; and we work against God instead of cooperating. To break the barriers our churches must be trained and educated and it is the responsibility of all of us in leadership to do this.

Expositions and arguments are persuasive for many, but personal experience is far more effective with the general church population. We can have the greatest impact on our world and encourage women and men called into ministry if we educate our congregations regarding the ordination and location of women pastors and *give them* women pastors.