

Box 21
Folder F
item 11

WOMEN'S ROLE IN MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

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Preamble

The assignment given to me was to clarify a "personal understanding and practice" with respect to the ministry of women in the church. Further, it was requested that the paper be written in a Bible study format. That Mennonite Brethren should gather to review church issues in the context of Biblical study and interpretation is right and good, and certainly in keeping with our Anabaptistic roots and ongoing commitment. "Was sagt das Wort?" (What does the Word say?) is still the right question where Christian belief and practice are the topics at hand. The assigned approach also defines some parameters for this paper. It will not be a research paper in that it will not represent many and varied collected and contrasted opinions of others who have interpreted, re-interpreted and perhaps misinterpreted the texts. It is clear enough that sincere, and noteworthy Bible scholars can be listed as endorsers of each of the various "conclusions" that are being reached on the subject.

It is also clear that arriving at differing interpretations (opinions?) on the matter does not by default make one or another of those who disagree unbiblical. The issue isn't whether or not the Bible is truth, but how it is to be interpreted for understanding and practice. (And just as it is true that the context and culture in which the Scriptures were written had impact on its context and meaning, it must be borne in mind that our twentieth century cultural milieu may (for either good or ill) shade our view of the Holy Spirit's intent. (This is also true of any other of the historical cultural cradles of the church age).

It follows then that there may never be a time when any church (local or extended) will be fully in agreement on issues which are not fundamental non-

negotiables. And further, one must also be prepared to say that a present position
on an issue such as the one before may not be the last word, or (even after all
these years of study) the final and correct word.

Several further preliminary statements are in order here.

1. We confidently assert that women and men are created in the image of
God with inherent equality of worth before Him. (Genesis 1:26-27)
2. We confidently assert that the sexes are joint heirs with Christ of full
salvation. (Galatians 3:28-29)
3. We confidently assert that the Holy Spirit gifts all God's children for
ministry, and that it is His intent to have both men and women involved
in the work of the Kingdom. (I Corinthians 12:7; I Peter 4:10; Acts
2:17-18; Romans 16:1-16)
4. We confidently assert that the Fall resulted in complicating unholy
motivations and actions in the relationships between (now dominating)
men and (now grasping) women. (Genesis 3:1-19) (Or has our culture
reversed the problem?)
5. We confidently assert that the redemption of Christ is intended to be
the groundwork for the restoration of pre-curse conditions, and that we
still live within the process of that sanctification, and that it will be
completed at the end of the church age. (I Corinthians 15:20-28)
6. We confidently assert that this paper is not the author's immutable
word.

The question which remains is this: in what way do God-created and God-
ordained male and female distinctives impact His intention for function in His
church? (or in the Godly home?) That is, does God intend a difference in the

roles lived by women and men? Or yet another way, are there ministries intended
for women and men which are specifically assigned to one and not the other?

Inasmuch as it makes sense to utilize a half-ton pickup rather than a Jaguar
to jerk a stump, it seems plausible that the ultimate Designer had varying
intentions when He made mankind male and female. Given the falsehood of many
stereotypes and the unfair suppression of women in the past and present (and yes,
even within the church), and also given a current significant ferment, it is all the
more important that we allow the Scriptures to speak. We will examine five texts
in the order in which they appear in the Bible.

I Corinthians 11:3-16

The first thought which Paul introduces here is that there is a divinely
designed headship relationship within the family of God and the Godly family.
"The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the
head of Christ is God" (verse 3). He refers to Genesis 2:21-23 when in verses 8
and 9 he interprets and applies them by reminding us that "man did not come from
woman but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for
man." The plain meaning of the text for male-female relationship (re: headship) is
further clarified with respect to the marriage relationship in Ephesians 5:22-24,
where the Scripture teaches that wives submit and husbands serve as leaders (as
the church submits to Christ's leadership). Headship is God's intended plan
inasmuch as it is modelled in His relationship with His Son. They are One, but
the Son submitted to the Father's headship.

New interpretations of this text suggest that headship here means origin, but
it must not be restricted to that. It is clear in the case of husband-wife headship
that it must refer to leadership, for the topic is the wife's submission. The
relationship of the headship of the Father over the Christ must also refer to the

relationship they enjoyed during the incarnation. This clarifies that headship or leadership do not deny equality or suggest inferiority. A difference in assignment does not make for a conclusion about value. Verse 3 establishes the doctrinal foundation upon which the Holy Spirit clarifies other matters regarding the relationship between men and women and specifically in this passage, with respect to propriety in worship. The suggestion that because verses 8 and 9 speak of source (origin) the earlier verses must have the same meaning isn't convincing. It seems more likely that it is intended to clarify that the man was a created being and the woman a derived being. The Scriptures clarify by initial terminology ("suitable helper") that God's intent was to make woman because man alone was not good. The woman is man's counterpart and is his glory because she demonstrates how suitable a being God could create from man (whereas man is described as the crown of creation demonstrating the apex of God's creative work).

Verses 10 and 11 affirm that in spite of the underlying God intended headship relationships, neither men nor women are independent of each other. The church of Jesus Christ provides a context for full participation in the celebration of worship. Though this was contrary to earlier practice, the apostle clarifies that (culturally appropriate attire assumed) women are expected to meet for fellowship and worship with men as co-equal heirs and celebrators of salvation.

Whether or not the apostle has in view the marriage relationship in the earlier portions of this text, it is self evident that the doctrinal foundation which he places at the outset would have implication for spousal roles as well as the explained proper demeanor for worship (whether in public or not).

I Corinthians 14:33b-40

This text introduces a specific injunction that women should remain silent in the churches. Inasmuch as 11:2-16 did not speak to this, and freely included

women in the meetings of the church as co-equally involved, the challenge is to
harmonize the two sections. Some have suggested the reference is only to
speaking in tongues (it could include that). Others have noted that women sat
separately from men and if they voiced questions from their section, it would be
disruptive (this could be part of what is intended, especially because of the
reference to "asking at home"). Yet another view is that Paul needed to silence
the women to preserve respect and integrity for the Christian church in the first
century culture.

It seems clear, however, that the text cannot be understood that narrowly.
Verse 34 makes reference to what "the law says." The law must be a reference to
the Old Testament clarification that God had ordained headship in the relationship
between man and woman. As already clarified, this was to provide honor and
dignity to both in their God-assigned functions. Verse 37 asserts that Paul is
writing "the Lord's command." Verses 33 and 34 clearly show that the order is for
all the churches, regardless of cultural backdrop. It appears that this is not a
cultural mandate for the time, but a God ordained practice for all time.

Though it may well be that societies vary in their understanding and practice
of consensus acceptability, we must allow the text to state what it does. The
general context of "speak" in the chapter has most often to do with addressing the
entire assembly. Also note that Paul warns severely about prideful independent
practice countering of the clear Word of the Lord.

I Timothy 2:11-15

The practice of worship in the Ephesus church had evolved to various
disorders and confusion. The new found freedom in Christ which women had come
to experience apparently became the cradle out of which was birthed a situation in
which women had thrust themselves into positions of authority over men. It is not

conclusive that only married women are addressed. The principle of verse 15 is obviously general, for if it were not, any barren woman would be excluded from salvation.

In context we note Paul clarifying that the men of the church ought to lift up their hands in prayer "without wrath and doubting" (verse 8, literal). Following that example of holiness, he urges the women to dress and behave appropriately as "those who profess to worship God." (verses 9-10) Paul desires that the men (males) need to properly lift up holy hands in prayer, and that the women exemplify attitudes, demeanor, dress and deeds appropriate to their place alongside the men as co-worshippers.

Paul then addresses the matter of appropriate behavior for women in the church. To suggest that this entire text has nothing to say to the gathered church - that is, that it addresses only marriage relationships - would still leave the issues of submission and authority in place. The doctrinal foundation referenced in verses 13-14 is the same as referenced in other passages, and underlies the application Paul makes. Further, to redefine the text as special instruction for a special time does not satisfy for the same reason. The basic non-negotiable truth Paul cites as foundational is that God had a deliberate creation order and that authority follows those lines. It is true that acceptable hermeneutics must see the text in its context, but that does not negate its truth for other application. If delineation of authority is rooted in creation order, that stands for all time. Further, chapter 3, verse 15, indicates that this letter covers conduct for the church - God's household.

Verses 11 and 12 list three specific principles about the behavior of the woman in the public gathering: she is to be quiet rather than vocal; she is to

receive instruction rather than give it; and she is to refrain from taking authority
rather than usurping it.

It is clear enough that Paul is not giving an absolute gag order to women,
whether in worship or elsewhere. To remain quiet is not the same as to remain
(absolutely) silent. A key word in context is the word "teach", and there is a
clear link between teaching and authority. Paul states that women are not to have
authority over or to teach men ("I am continually not permitting that," Paul
asserts).

The doctrinal moorings in verses 13 and 14 clarify that God had an
intentional creation order. The fact that man was created first is referenced by
Paul as significant for leadership (or headship, or authority). Additionally, verse
14 states that Eve was first deceived and led man (mankind) into sin. The
inference seems to be that Eve's decision to head out independently, though God
had intended for her to link with Adam as his suitable helper, resulted in the fall.
This does not imply that the woman was more defective or inferior to the man.
The curse further clarifies that though it will not be what Eve desires, her
husband will rule over her (Genesis 3:16).

It is proposed by some that the meaning of "exercise authority" here is to
"domineer" or to "bring pressure in a sexual way." The relationship between verses
11 and 12 make that less than plausible. The statements of verse 12 are the
converse of verse 11 and flow out of it. Further, both the teaching and the
authority which the text disallows for women are clearly linked to men (as the
object of both verbs). Note, too, that Paul clarifies in other parallel texts that
women teaching other women is not contrary to creation order. (We will come to
this.) The restriction given is not a prohibition in a wholestic or general sense,

but rather for the church gathered; that is, it clarifies that God's order is that men serve as leaders by the authority that God vests in them.

The scriptural encouragements to teach "one another" are not in the least contradictory to this proviso. Public teaching/preaching in the gathered body is but one of a myriad of ways that teaching is exercised in the body of Christ. Nor is there inherent in this principle truth the conclusion that women will never have a prophetic or teaching word for men (or their husbands). We have Scriptural affirmations of such, but not in the function of ongoing authoritative leadership for the gathered church. Significant ministries are not confined to up front teaching or the exercise of eldership authority in the church. (If that should be true, we preachers have reason to run for cover, for we have preached heresy, and sexually integrated mutiny will be God blessed).

Verse 15 need not be as difficult as some would make it. It is true that there are widely varied (and often elaborate, if not compelling) interpretations. Some would suggest that since the woman lives through childbirth, God is evidencing that He moderates this judicial sentence by His grace. Nor does the context support the notion that it is the birth of Christ which provides their salvation (though theologically that is true). The return to dignity for the woman, who led mankind into sin, is now derived through a return to the divinely ordained role of suitable helper as faithful, loving, holy and propitious woman and mother. Mothering in a God ordained and ordered way restores women to rightful dignity. (As earlier noted, this verse clarifies a principle and does not, therefore, demean singleness or barrenness.)

So, while there is no distinction between male or female by way of spiritual position in the Kingdom of Christ, there is a distinction when it comes to the role

of authority in the local church (and for that matter in the home), and it is rooted in God's intentional creation order.

Titus 2:3-5

The maleness and femaleness of mankind gives rise to differences in role assignments. Though husband and wife are joint heirs of grace, they are given different assignments simply because one is the husband and one the wife. Titus 2:3-5 addresses some specifics about God's plan for women. The text first addresses older women who may or may not be married. A reverent lifestyle is enjoined, and then clarified in several specific examples: avoidance of slander, not slave to much wine, and teaching what is good. Exemplary and experienced women then are assigned to train the younger women to love and be subject to their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, to be pure, to be busy at home and to be kind. If one takes the last clause to refer to the entire section, then all of these together will verify God's word that such women (wives/mothers) will be living as God intends. If the clause only modifies the final statement, then being subject to their husbands will honor the plan of God. In either case, submission is included. It must be understood that this is not a call to blind subservience. Biblical submission is mandated for all of the family of God, and it calls for meaningful interdependency and harmony. Nonetheless, there is a clear mandate here for wives to give their husbands authority in their relationship.

The other injunction which has application for our subject is the reference to being "busy at home." The original word translates "home workers". As disconcerting as it may be, the Bible makes an unmistakable case for wives/mothers to have significant responsibility for home management. (Proverbs 31 does this as well.)

How does this speak to our subject? It suggests at least two things. In the context of the church, older experienced women ought to teach younger women formally and by example how to honor God in their roles. Secondly, wives are to preserve the integrity of God's word by giving their husbands the responsibility to be lead rower. This has application in both the home and the church.

I Peter 3:1-7

In this text, Peter reiterates and clarifies some of what we have already studied from the pen of Paul. He corroborates that wives are called to be submissive to their husbands. It is clear that it is not only the assignment of those whose husbands do not believe in or always obey the Lord. Peter goes on to suggest that true beauty is the result of Godly attitude and behavior, not fashionable clothes and jewelry. The inner self, he asserts, is the place where the beauty of the gentle and quiet spirit is born, and this, he adds, is of great worth in God's sight. Apparently, it was not only gentile women who struggled with Godly submission. Peter uses the illustration of Sarah (surely a hit with Hebrew women) to elevate an attitude which gives the husband the freedom to lead (though he may well err in that exercise). The Old Testament account of Abraham and Sarah bears out that God honored their ultimate trust in Him and their mutual support of each other, flawed though it was. (Thank God that His blessing and providence are aimed at us in spite of where we are aimed!)

A proper caution and mandate is also delivered to the husbands, who shall respectfully and with consideration live with their wives as co-heirs of the gracious gift of life. The imperative is intensified, as the Holy Spirit clarifies that to do less will result in the hindrance of the husband's intimacy with God.

What is God's word for women in the church? Pursue a spirit of submission and the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit in the presence of all.

Women In Ministry

Our final subject is the matter of Biblical reference to women in ministry. Five women are mentioned in connection with periodic or momentary prophetic ministry. Miriam, Moses' sister, led Israel in a hymn of praise and delivered a one time message from God to women (Exodus 15:20-21). Deborah was called into a momentary prophetic ministry to deliver a message from God to Barak (Judges 4-5). Huldah was given a Revelation from God to be given to Hilkiyah the priest regarding upcoming judgement (II Kings). Noadiah, who harassed Nchemiah as he rebuilt the Jerusalem wall, turned out to be a false prophetess. (Neh 6:14). Isaiah's wife was called a prophetess in the context of God giving them a son (Isaiah 8:3).

Romans 16 must be noted, as it references Phoebe's ministry. There remains no question about Phoebe's considerable involvement in ministry. The question is whether the words used to describe her work are the same as those referring to men in New Testament references. Some have argued that the feminine word (prostatis) used to describe Phoebe's ministry grows out of the same root (proistemi) from which the masculine noun (prostates) originates, and therefore, the feminine noun must of necessity define leadership authority. Language scholars (of various positions) agree that this statement is not to be viewed as saying that Phoebe was a woman ruler. New Testament and classical Greek lexicons consistently indicate that the word means "helper" or "patroness", but not ruler.

If then, we allow for her ministry to be additionally defined by the word deaconess, we are still left with the question of whether it was an official office of service. And if it was, as this writer is inclined to think, it still differentiates her from the teaching or ruling office (eldership), because deacon is the serving office, not one of leadership authority.

Anna (Luke 2:36-38) is called a prophetess committed to faithful worship who
witnessed to all about the coming Christ. Acts 21:9 refers to the four daughters
of Philip who prophesied. This appears to be specific time and place speaking of
God's truth (perhaps comparable to the Old Testament). Jesus' mother, Mary,
prophetically raised her voice to disclose God's truth, and this in the context of
family (Luke 1:39-56). Prisca (Romans 16:3) is referred to as a fellow worker.
Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:3) are commended for contending alongside Paul
for the Gospel.

End Thoughts

1. The Old Testament does not reference any women kings, priests, writers
of Scripture, or female ongoing prophetic ministry.
2. The New Testament does not reference any women preachers, pastor-
teachers, elders, evangelists, writers of Scripture, or apostles.
3. Christ did not choose female apostles. (Mark 3:16-19)
4. The Scriptures clarify that women pray and prophesy (Joel 2:28-29;
I Cor 11:5).
5. One of the qualifications for eldership is that they rule well at home
(I Timothy 3:4-5).
6. What God requires of male headship in the family, he also expects in the
church; unconditional, sacrificial self giving service in leadership
(Matthew 20:26-28).
7. We should deal equitably in our home churches and in our foreign
mission churches on this matter.

Present Practice

1. Elders/Pastors (the teaching/ruling ministers) are men.
2. Women exercise authority in roles other than church governance.
3. Women teach in roles other than at the gathered church.

Conclusion

The matter of the place of women in the church (and in the home) is not and must not degenerate to a political or sexist power struggle. We are engaged in the pursuit of Biblical directives for marriage and the body of Christ. Man and woman have been given equality by God, and also differences. Both of these are truths. We must recognize, affirm, and celebrate them by individual and corporate submission to God and each other as He intended.

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