

## **WOMEN IN THE CHURCH:**

### **DOCTRINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Exegesis gives the meaning of a text. Whether something is more than culturally or historically conditioned is determined by doctrinal considerations. Is a given practice or teaching rooted in fundamental biblical theology? Biblical doctrine supplies the intent or purpose for biblical laws. I do not mean whether one can attribute a theological significance something, but does the Bible itself give a doctrinal meaning? Were the teachings of 1 Cor. 14:26-40 and 1 Tim. 2:8-15 so culturally conditioned as not meant to be universal and timeless? The fact that Paul repeated essentially the same teaching to two different cities at different times indicates there was more than a local problem involved. There are indications in the texts of a wider application than the culture of the first century Mediterranean world. However, what really answers the question is doctrine. Do these teachings rest on fundamental biblical doctrine? This is decisive. Paul evidently thought his directions did not rest on whim, male chauvinism, or cultural relativity but on the nature of God's created order.

**That Paul gave doctrinal reasons for women not to teach or exercise authority in church shows that it was not culturally self-evident that they should not do so.** If some women were acting otherwise, their very practice indicates that it was not culturally self-evident that they should not and that another practice from what Paul enjoins would have had a receptive audience. With those preliminary observations, let us look at the doctrinal basis of the limitations on women's activities in the assembly.

#### **I. The Doctrine of the Church as a Family**

**A. The church is described as a family. 1 Timothy 3:14-15--"I am writing these instructions to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household [family] of God, which is the church of the living God."**

**Hebrews 3:5-6--"Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as**

a servant . . . ; Christ, however, was faithful over God`s house as a son, and we are his house."

1 Pet. 4:17--"For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God."

B. In the family that functions according to God`s regulations the husband exercises a loving headship or leadership. Any social group has to have some form of leadership. In the family this leadership is assigned in Scripture to the man. Genesis 3:16, "Your husband . . . shall rule over you" [NRSV].

1 Corinthians 11:3--"I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ."

Colossians 3:18-19--"Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands [that much the pagan writers said], as is fitting in the Lord [the distinctly Christian motivation]. Husbands, love your wives [going beyond ruling over them] and never treat them harshly [the manner of the leadership]."

1 Peter 3:1-7--"Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of [be submissive to] your own husbands . . . . Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the feminine weaker vessel, since they too are co-heirs of the gracious gift of life."

Ephesians 5:21-33--"Be subject [submitting yourselves] to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, to your own husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church . . . . Husbands, love your wives as also Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . This [marriage] is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband."

Loving service (as exemplified by Christ) calls forth loving obedience. The husband`s headship is not arbitrary or dictatorial, but based on love, so there is no dominance or suppression; and the wife`s submission is voluntary, not enforced.

C. Leadership in the church corresponds to leadership in the family. Since the church is a family, we should expect the same principles of organization to be operative in the church as apply to the family, and indeed this is true.

1. Leadership in the church is given to male family heads, not to all males. The qualifications for bishops/elders exclude women from this position--1 Timothy 3:2, 4-5: "Now a bishop must be . . . the husband of one wife . . . . He must manage his own household [oikos] well, having his children in submission with all dignity--for if someone does not know how to manage his own household [oikos], how can he take care of God's church [ekklēsia]?" Titus 1:5-6--"Appoint elders in every town . . . someone who is the husband of one wife, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious." Elders are stewards administering the affairs of God's household (Titus 1:7).

2. As the leadership of the church (elders) is given to men, so leadership in that which expresses what the church is, namely its assembly, is exercised by men. The gathered church reflects its nature as the family or household of God. That is one doctrinal point: the church is a family, and its organization and leadership correspond to the divine arrangements for the family. A second doctrinal point is--

## II. The Pattern of Religious Leadership in the Bible

A. In the Old Testament there were prophetesses (Miriam--Exodus 15:20; Huldah--2 Kings 22:14), and a woman could be a judge (Deborah--Judges 4-5), so God could choose women for these roles when he wanted to; but there were no women priests (Leviticus 8-9; Numbers 18:1-20). Priestesses were fairly common in the religions of the Ancient Near East, so the culturally acceptable practice would have been for Israel to have them.

B. In the New Testament leadership in the church is given to men.

1. Jesus appointed no women among the Twelve.
2. Women were among the 120 disciples (Acts 1:13-15),

but a successor to Judas was to be chosen from among the "men" (Acts 1:21--the word is noun for "males").

3. The Seven who were put in charge of relief to the widows [women] (Acts 6:1-6) were chosen by the whole community (Acts 6:5), but were specified to be "men" [again males] (Acts 6:3, 5).

4. There were prophetesses in the early church (Acts 21:9), but no female elders.

5. The pattern of religious leadership in the Bible is that women were fully involved in the life of God's people, but men were chosen to lead.

### III. The Created Order

This third and crucial doctrinal point has to do with how God created human beings. The distinctions between male and female were established at creation. Here I note that 1 Tim. 6:1 makes an argument from what outsiders think in reference to the conduct of slaves, but that argument is not made about women in church. The instructions in regard to women do not rest on what society thinks--not then nor should it now.

#### A. Male-Female relations are based on the created order.

1. Sometimes interpreters, positing an egalitarian reading of Genesis 1-2, make that the basis for interpreting Paul's theology instead of letting Paul's understanding of Genesis guide the expression of Paul's teachings. Paul leaves us in no doubt of his ranking of male and female (1 Cor. 11:3--God, Christ, man, woman).

2. Paul affirms a priority for the male and a spiritual equality and mutuality for male and female but never an identity of functions--1 Corinthians 11:9, 11-12; 14:33-34; 1 Timothy 2:13-15. These passages were part of the previous lesson.

B. Genesis 1-2 presents 3 basic ideas in regard to men and women:

1. The fundamental equality of human beings, male and female, all made in the image of God--"So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them. . . . God blessed

them, and God said to them . . . , 'Have dominion over' " fish, birds, and animals. Possessing the image of God is the basis of human beings ruling over creation.

2. An affirmation of sexuality--Genesis 1:27-28, "Male and female he created them. . . . And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'" Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh."

3. A difference of function and status for the woman as derived from the man--Genesis 2:7, 18-23. The male is first, and God addresses Adam as the representative human being. Eve was created second (from Adam, not from earth).

a. Eve was designated Adam's "Helper" (Gen. 2:18), that is "one who gives help or support," in this case a companion complementary to the man. Hence, there is a mutual relationship resulting from the undesirability of man being alone. No subordination is implied, but the word does affirm the purpose for woman. And you women know how much we men need help!

b. Adam named Eve after himself (*ish, isha*; similarly in English, man--woman). "Naming" is indicative of male leadership--for the significance of naming note Psalm 147:4; Isaiah 43:1; 63:19; 4:1.

C. Genesis 3:16 establishes (or reinforces) a condition of subordination for woman as a consequence of sin--"To the woman [the Lord God] said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'"

1. The coming of Christ and the redemption from sin he brought has not canceled the pain involved in childbirth nor the sexual attraction of female and male; nor has it canceled God's order of the rule of husband over wife.

2. Paul, however, understood a hierarchical relation of male and female to have existed from before the fall, from the creation of male and female--1 Corinthians 11:3, 11-12; 1 Timothy 2:13.

D. Here may be the place to address why the distinction of male and female functions is carried over to the assembly of the church. **Why is a distinction made between in and out of the assembly?**

1. **The assembly brings God's people into his presence in a special way and so is meant to reflect the character of God and what he instituted at creation.**

2. **Man and woman have distinctive spheres in which to show their identity as male and female, and one of these finds expression in the meeting of the church.** Scripture makes a distinction between what is appropriate outside the assembly but not in the assembly--eating of food (1 Cor. 11:17-22), speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14:2, 6-19, 27-28), and so with women's speech. **The leaders in the assembly are representatives of God to the people and of the people to God.** God transcends sexual distinctions, but most often he presents himself by male images--Father, King, etc. Christ became incarnate as a male. Hence, those who bring God's word in the assembly are men. The representatives of the congregation bring the words of the people to God. This representative role is given to men.

E. **These doctrinal affirmations based on the created order may find some support from anthropological, sociological, and psychological studies.**

1. **Through history most human societies have expected male leadership and have made some general distinctions between male and female spheres of activity.** The distinctions established at creation are more than cultural, however much culture may influence and shape their expression.

2. **Whatever distinctive characteristics of men and women beyond their biological differences that may be established do not mean one sex is inferior to the other, only that they are different.** Distortions of the differences and of male-female relationships come from the fall; the distinctions themselves do not.

IV. **Oneness in Christ**

We come now to a doctrinal point that has been widely misunderstood. The doctrine that has been advocated on behalf of identity of roles in the church actually points to different roles.

A. The crucial text for those who seek Biblical warrant for giving women equality with men in the leadership of the church is Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." This charter verse of racial, social, and gender equality in Christ, however, does not abolish all the differences and least of all the differences of function between male and female.

B. In its context Galatians 3:28 has to do with admission to the people of God and one's status before God and nothing to do with functions in the church.

1. Against Judaizers Paul insists that all have equal access to the promises made to Abraham and his descendants (Gal. 3:23-29). Under the law of Moses women, who could not be circumcised, had their covenant relationship with God through a male (father, husband). Not so in Christ, for in him they have direct access to God. The single woman and woman married to an unbeliever has direct access to God in Christ.

2. As perhaps a formula associated with baptism (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:11), does this verse have wider implications?

C. What does to be "one in Christ" mean? This is not the only passage where Paul speaks of oneness in Christ. Paul's other uses of the idea of oneness in Christ do not establish identity of functions but actually affirm different functions working in unity in the church; they serve to affirm unity in human diversity. Oneness is not sameness.

1. 1 Corinthians 12:12--"The body is one," but it "has many members" that are quite different (1 Cor. 12:14-30). The members of the body are equally necessary, but they do not have the same functions. The same is true in the body of Christ.

2. Romans 12:4--Although our human body is one, "not all the members [of that body] have the same function"; the same again is true for the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5-8).

3. These other passages suggest that Galatians 3:28 rather than being an affirmation of same activities actually implies different functions, or at least is consistent with such a distinction between diversity of gifts, functions, and responsibilities. If there were no diversity, the affirmation of oneness would be superfluous. Being one in Christ does not abolish different functions for male and female and the different instructions that pertain to those different functions. On the analogy of the other "oneness" passages, Gal. 3:28 actually implies different roles for male and female and is not declaring sameness of activities.

4. Just as a person in Christ continues to be a Jew or a Gentile, slave or free, so one does not cease being male and female. Distinctions between Jew and Gentile, free and slave, male and female are not abolished so far as social status is concerned. The normal biological, psychological, and sociological differences between male and female remain, and so do the regulations pertaining to their different roles (Eph. 5:22-33).

D. The abolition of male-female differences is an eschatological condition. As Jesus said in Luke 20:34-36--"Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection."

1. It is a mistake to try to anticipate that condition in this life. As a parallel, Christ came to abolish death (2 Tim. 1:10), but we still die. We have to wait for the resurrection for this condition to be realized.

2. That mistake of anticipating the resurrection condition was apparently being made by some Corinthian Christians (1 Cor. 4:8); others claimed that the resurrection had already

occurred (2 Tim. 2:18).

3. The principles enunciated in response to these problems remain valid. We still live in "this age," not in the age of the physical resurrection.

Different roles do not imply superiority or inferiority in worth. The wide acceptance in Western society that the sexes have equal value is largely to be ascribed to Christianity. The treatment of women used to be an apologetic argument for Christianity.

Now let's make some doctrinal observations on the place of culture.

#### V. The Place of Culture

A. These theological reasons--the church as family, the pattern of religious leadership in the Bible, the created order, and the meaning of oneness in Christ--show that the Biblical view of women was not simply derived from culture, even if influenced by it.

1. Israel was counter-cultural in the context of the Ancient Near East by not having female priests.

2. In the Greco-Roman world, there were many priestesses, and women held positions of official leadership in civil and social life. It would not have been unheard of for the church to give women comparable leadership positions.

B. As another indication that something more than culture was involved, one may note that Jesus broke with culture in his treatment of women.

1. For instance, the Gospels record his close relationships with women, his tender treatment of them, and even his teaching and entering into religious discussions with them.

2. Jesus welcomed women to be instructed by him, as Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:27), contrary to rabbinic practice. Jesus equalized divorce law, forbidding the man as well as the woman to initiate a divorce, contrary to Jewish precedent (Mark 10:11-12).

3. These breaks with convention show that Jesus' selection of men for the Twelve was deliberate.

4. Sometimes interpreters point to Jesus' treatment of women as an indication that he did not want limitations placed on their service but then argue that it was because of cultural considerations that he chose only men as apostles and his apostles in turn placed restrictions on women's activities. However, one cannot have it both ways, as if Jesus were a counter-cultural egalitarian and the restrictions on women were cultural.

5. Where important principles were at stake, the early church was counter-cultural.

a. Dropping the requirement of circumcision. If Paul simply followed Jewish rather than Greco-Roman practice in regard to women, would he not have done the same in regard to circumcision? If he wanted to open doors to Gentiles, would he not have followed Gentile practices about women?

b. Non-use of instrumental music in worship. Such was common in Hellenistic cults. Would not its use have been the culturally relevant thing to do in Greco-Roman society?

c. Participation in cultic and social meals. Joining in these occasions would have been a culturally relevant practice.

## V. Conclusion

A. The doctrines of the church as a family, the pattern of religious leadership throughout the Bible, the created order of nature, and spiritual (not physical) oneness in the body of Christ undergird the New Testament injunctions about different male and female functions and about male leadership and female submission in the church. Those who deny that 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2 are normative for the church logically have to deny the biblical doctrines that are their basis. Indeed, these biblical doctrines are a scandal to feminists.

Why is a distinction made between the assembly and other activities? Bible does not say, but these doctrinal points permit some inferences. In assembly the church comes before God as Creator, so it reflects what God instituted at creation. The church comes in its nature as a family, so it reflects the princi-

ples established for the family.

B. The Bible does affirm the spiritual equality of men and women. But **Equality is not the same as identity, and differences of the sexes do not mean inequality. Male domination and female equivalence with the male are both distortions of God's intention of mutuality in creation. In a partnership, although the partners may do some of the same tasks, the normal practice is a division of labor.**

C. Different roles, however, do not imply superiority or inferiority in worth.

1. A person's role and that person's worth are not related in Scripture.

2. A bold and striking demonstration of this truth is Christ himself--equal to God in nature, but taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7).

People want to take the positive words about women in Scripture to mean women can do everything men do and make the alternative to this a demeaning or suppressed view of women. But these are not the only alternatives. In fact, Scripture both affirms the equal worth and value of women and men and assigns them different roles in family and church.

The women in Ephesus (1 Tim. 2) and perhaps in Corinth (1 Cor. 11 and 14) could have made the same arguments Christian feminists today make, and if we can mirror read these texts, perhaps they did. Supporters of women in leadership positions in the church argue: male and female are in the image of God (correct); the effects of the original transgression are cancelled in Christ (that needs to be qualified, for a process was begun that is not completed in this world); women have received gifts from the Holy Spirit (Paul says that does not mean they are to be used in the assembly). Paul counters these arguments with the different ranking in creation; the "not yet" aspect of salvation and eschatology; some gifts are for the assembly and some are not; and the apostolic authority of the command of God determines what is to be done. I prefer to be on Paul's side of the argument

rather than on his opponents' side.

**D. According to Jesus' teaching and example, the role of a servant makes one great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-27). The serving functions are the path to greatness in the kingdom of God. Women in their serving functions are actually most like Christ and are expressing the true greatness in the kingdom of God.**

From a doctrinal standpoint what men and women have in common is greater than their differences, but men and women are created different shows God has different purposes for them.