

Philosophy of Women in Leadership

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Women are important to the plan of God. This may seem like an unnecessary statement of the obvious, yet often this important message gets clouded by our culture. There are even those in the body of Christ that so promote an imbalanced view of submission, that they leave little room for women to do anything in the service of God except take care of the nursery. Yet God makes it clear that women are important to Him.

In Genesis 1:26-28, when the Trinity initiated the creation of mankind, we read, “*Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let THEM rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created THEM. And God blessed them; and God said to THEM, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” (emphasis mine). In the plan of God, it takes both male and female to reflect His image.*

During the dismal period of the Judges, it was Deborah who God used in a mighty way to deliver His people (Judges 4 and 5) and who was called a prophetess (Judges 4:4). Huldah spoke, “*Thus says the Lord,*” just as the male prophets did (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22). It was Miriam, the sister of Moses, who ministered alongside him and was also called a prophetess (Exodus 15:20-21) as was the wife of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3). Anna in the New Testament was called a prophetess (Luke 2:36). God used the woman Rahab to save the lives of the two spies Joshua sent into Canaan (Joshua 2). Young Esther was God’s chosen agent to save all the Jews from extermination (Esther 4:13-17). It was a woman who rescued the infant Joash from wicked queen Athaliah’s evil attempt to destroy all the descendents of David, the line from which the Messiah would come (2 Chronicles 22:10-12). In fact, as we read the genealogy of Jesus, we find four women mentioned there, contrary to the normal culture of mentioning only the male descendents (Matthew 1:2-16). God values and uses women, plain and simple.

When God became flesh and dwelt among us, He stepped forward as the great liberator of women. Jesus affirmed women in His public ministry. He reached out to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), and then used her to take the gospel to a whole village. He rescued the woman caught in adultery from unjust justice (John 8). He gave women a prominence in His life and ministry that the culture did not.

In the ministry of the apostle Paul, we see example after example of women stepping forward and being used by God. It was Eunice and Lois, probably converts of Paul’s at Lystra, who laid the spiritual foundation of one of his key disciples, Timothy (1 Timothy 1:5). It was Pricilla who along with her husband Aquilla labored alongside Paul in Corinth (Acts 18). This same couple (with the wife mentioned first suggesting a prominence to her labor) who came alongside Apollos and corrected some doctrinal mistakes (Acts 18:26).

What is the message from all of this? Women are important to God. If they weren’t He wouldn’t have made so many. In fact, often women are far more spiritually sensitive and responsive than men. It is time for the church to affirm their contributions to the cause of Christ. Whatever we conclude about the role of women in the church, we must affirm the Biblical message that they are of equal worth to God. Galatians 3:26-27 makes it clear that slaves and free men may hold different positions in society but they are of equal value in God’s sight. Likewise, male and female are “*one in Christ Jesus.*”

What is the place of Women in Leadership?

Whenever the subject is mentioned of the proper place of women in leadership and church life, invariably Paul’s words to Timothy come up. It is important before you look at exactly what Paul said, that we recognize the context of those words. Paul’s first letter to Timothy was written to help his disciple bring order to a church in disarray. In 1 Timothy 3:15 we read, “*...I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God.*” In this context of dialog about roles and

PHILOSOPHY OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP (CONTINUED)

conduct in the church, Paul mentions elders and deacons, and also says, “*Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.*” The key question is whether Paul is speaking of women in general, or of the wives of deacons. There are many reasons why each person believes what they believe. Look at the list below and place in order from 1-4 (1 being most significant) these different reasons for what you believe about women in leadership.

- ___ I think women are not given enough prominence in the church.
- ___ What I believe is based on the traditions of our church.
- ___ What I believe is based on what I have been taught by others.
- ___ What I believe is based on having thoroughly studied the relevant passages.

The challenge in interpreting Paul’s words here is that it is hard to avoid allowing personal and cultural bias to color how we read them. When one looks closely at 1 Timothy 3:11 in its context, it is most likely referring to the wives of the deacons, not a separate office of deaconess since the qualifications for a deacon continue in verse 12 and include “*husbands of only one wife*”. If Paul saw deacons as being either men or women, he would probably have said something like “married to only one person.” One would expect that if Paul were referring to a different office (deaconess), he would have finished the one before beginning the other as he did with elders. This does not necessarily close the door on women as deacons, but it doesn’t fully open it either. Let’s look at another passage. Romans 16:1 reads, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.” The Greek word translated “servant” here is *diakonia* from which the word “deacon” is derived. Does this mean she was a deaconess? The word can be used in a formal sense, but is more often used in an informal sense and translated “servant” as it is here. While some see in these brief passages room for allowing it, the issue is far from being clearly affirmed Scripturally. Equally important, even if you believe these Scriptures allow the practice, you must recognize that there are a great many who do not. It would present an extra challenge for a woman to be an effective leader while also being a stumbling block to some in the body she would serve. Jesus was a great liberator of women. He afforded them a prominence and value the culture did not. But he did not place any women among His disciples – His leaders in training (see Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). He ministered to, and was ministered to by women (see Matthew 27:55) – in fact, a group of women were His primary financial supporters (Luke 8:1-3) – but He did not make them leaders over men.

Can a Woman Teach in the church?

When the apostle Paul wrote Timothy about “*conduct in the house of God*” (1 Timothy 3:15) he didn’t leave out the topic of women teaching. It is separate from the question of whether or not a woman can be an elder or a deacon, but it is related to it. If a woman cannot teach in church, she cannot be an elder. What is God’s view of this issue?

Culturally, our day is awash in messages that blur the God-given distinctions between men and women. Though the physical differences are obvious, many try to argue that those are the only differences. It is important that we interpret our experiences and our culture in the light of Scripture, instead of the other way around. Some today are trying to remove the concept of the Fatherhood of God, not because it isn’t clearly taught in the Bible, but because it disagrees with their cultural bias. The Bible must be our authority.

The apostle Paul addresses women teaching in 1 Timothy 2:9-15. Regarding what a woman should do in church, he writes that she should adorn herself with more than good looks. Paul instructs that in church (that is the preceding context of the chapter) a woman should be modestly and discreetly dressed (see also 1 Peter 3:1-4). She should make her reputation by good works, not good looks. Clearly, women are to take part in the ministry of the church. Regarding the church service, she is to receive instruction with a submissive attitude. She is not allowed to “*teach or exercise authority*” over a man. This does not say she cannot teach. The Greek word *didasko* (translated “teach”) here is in the present tense, meaning teaching in an ongoing basis. The text does not say a woman can never teach in the church, but rather,

PHILOSOPHY OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP (CONTINUED)

she should not teach and audience including men on a regular basis. Paul gives several reasons for this limitation. First, he affirms that God in His sovereignty chose to create man first. This does not mean greater value, but unique purpose. Woman was created to be a helper to man – not the other way around. Second, Paul argues that it was Eve who first disobeyed God, not Adam. Moreover, her disobedience was because of deception. It is difficult to define all that is meant by this, but the main point is clear. Eve was susceptible to deception leading to sin, while Adam sinned willfully. In the larger sense, this helps to explain one of the reasons why before God he is held more responsible than she is.

While traditionally the church has emphasized the restrictions of this passage, to treat it fairly we must acknowledge that the main point is one of liberation, not restriction. Paul's words do not appear in a vacuum. They exist in a cultural context far different than ours today. Typically in the culture of the day, women were not taught or allowed to learn. Some Jewish rabbis would not teach women at all, and some called it "throwing pearls to pigs." The woman's place in the Gentile world was not much better. Yet the central imperative of this passage is not the restriction on teaching. The lone imperative (command) is to "receive instruction" or as the King James version translates it, "*Let the woman learn...*" In the context of that culture Paul's words are positive, not negative. The admonition against taking an ongoing position of teacher was juxtaposed against this positive invitation for women to be included in the times of instruction as equal learners. Paul says, "*But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.*" The main verb here is not an imperative (command) but rather, an indicative (statement of fact). Paul is contrasting what he does allow (women to learn) with what he does not allow (women to teach or exercise authority over men on an ongoing basis).

Finally, Paul makes the statement that women are "*preserved through the bearing of children.*" Now, what does that mean? The Greek word translated "*preserved*" can refer to salvation, though it doesn't always carry an eternal connotation. There have been several different interpretations put forward over the years. One view is that Paul is not speaking of women in general but specifically has Mary in view – in other words, he is contrasting sin entering the world through Eve with salvation entering the world through Mary. It is an interesting idea, but if that were the point one would expect it to be made more clearly. Another view is that eternal salvation is what is meant. In this view women are not "*saved by means of childbearing*", but "saved in the midst of childbearing" or "in spite of" childbearing (whose additional pain stands as being their unique consequence from the fall). The third view is that salvation is only in a temporal sense. In context, women are seen as being saved from all limitations on teaching through being given the primary role of teaching in the home with her children. This idea would make more sense in fitting with the overall flow of the passage.

Paul makes clear in Titus 2:3-5 that women can and should teach. Therefore, the restriction in 1 Timothy cannot be taken to limit all teaching. Trying to take authority over men seems to be the main point there. Older women are to teach younger women how to be good wives, mothers, and Christians. The church needs women. Their service is of great importance and impact. Their voice should be heard and valued. But they are subject to limitations as are all in the body of Christ. Submission is not always by an inferior to a superior (as in children to parents) but sometimes is used of one of equal value placing themselves under the authority of another. Most of the men in a congregation are not elders. They too must submit to leaders. All of us must be submissive to the head of the church, Christ.

* For additional thoughts on the role of women in teaching read the Doctrinal Commentary by Greek Scholar, Dr. Spiros Zodhiates in his comments on 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers).