

Why Wesleyans Favor Women in Ministry

by
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- 1. Wesleyans favor the possibility of women in all positions of ministry because it represents the glorious fulfillment of the gospel.**

Galatians 3:27-28 say, “*As many who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is not ‘male and female.’ For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

Often when weighing Scripture with Scripture, we must decide what the general principle is and what might be the exception to the rule. In this case, clearly “In Christ there is not ‘male and female’” is the general principle to which any other verses would be exceptions.

For example, we would not say, “A woman is not to teach or have authority over a man, BUT in Christ there is no ‘male and female.’” The one relates to earthly administration, the other to heavenly, *spiritual* identity. Clearly the heavenly and spiritual have decisive precedence over the earthly and temporary. “You are *all* sons of God” (Gal. 3:26). Any earthly subordination or earthly distinction in role would be exactly that: earthly and temporary. We have no reason to believe that in heaven such differentiations will exist in role or authority.

Not “Male and Female”

Galatians 3:28 says, “In Christ there is not ‘male and female.’” Paul’s wording here alludes to Genesis 1:27 where God creates humans “male and female.” After Paul has used “neither-nor” several times, he interestingly switches his grammar: “neither Jew *nor* Greek... neither slave *nor* free”—then “not ‘male *and* female.’” Paul was not using awkward grammar. He made this switch to allude intentionally to Genesis 1:27 where God created humans “male and female.”

Therefore, in Christ there is not “male and female.” The distinction, made at creation, is undone in Christ. Indeed, in heaven any subordination of husband and wife will not exist because in heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels (e.g. Mark 12:25-26).

Moving Closer to Heaven on Earth

For purposes of comparison, we might note that the books of the New Testament assume that Christians can have slaves. There were individuals in the first century who did not practice slavery on principle (see Philo on the Essenes, *Every Good Person is Free* 79), but the New Testament books do not argue this point. They never argue for the abolition of slavery. Even in Philemon, Paul does not explicitly tell this slave owner to set his slave free. Indeed, Colossians—a letter often thought to have accompanied Philemon—reinforces traditional slave-master roles (Col. 3:22-4:1).

Nevertheless, we would argue that the world moved closer to heaven when slavery was abolished. Similarly, the world moves closer to heaven when we enact as much as possible the equality of men and women on a spiritual plane. Some might argue that the female body has implications for the roles of women on the physical plane. But the glorious proclamation of the Christian gospel is that both male and female enter equally into Christ, both have equal access to God through Christ, and in heaven there will be no subordination of one to the other. Male spirit and female spirit are equal in Christ, and there can be no hierarchy between them.

Regardless of what one thinks on the question of husbands and wives, the heavenly destination in relation to the female spirit seems clear. How could we argue that in Christ a woman has any less access to heaven or the Spirit than a man? And if a woman has equal access to the Spirit, how could we argue that she has any less of God’s word to convey than a man? Some may argue for an earthly hierarchy, but how could anyone possibly deny that “not male and female” is a fundamental spiritual truth?

Females Who Prophesied in the New Testament

Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17 predicted that Christian daughters would prophesy. These verses are undeniable affirmations that God uses women to convey spiritual truths to the earth. It thus reinforces our claim that women have access to the Spirit in Christ just as men do. We cannot use our interpretations of other Scriptures to negate this clear implication of Acts.

Indeed, in Acts 21:9 we learn that the 4 virgin daughters of Philip the evangelist prophesied. 1 Corinthians 11:5 refers to *married* women prophesying as well. We know they are married because their lack of covering dishonors their heads—which 11:3 defines as their husbands. For this reason we cannot claim that only single women can preach.

Similarly, there is nothing in these contexts that indicates these women only prophesied to women. Indeed, the 1 Corinthians 11 passage implies the contrary. Since the spirits of women and men are undifferentiated “in Christ,” we would be surprised if such a distinction were made in the first place. Christ has conquered the limitations of

the earth and the sin of Eve! Any lingering traces of the limitations of earth will fully disappear in the kingdom of God.

2. We favor the possibility of women in all positions of ministry because the Biblical arguments against it don't hold up against close scrutiny.

Husband-Wife or Man-Woman

We should probably distinguish husband/wife issues from the issue of women in ministry in general. We can fully believe that the husband is the head of the wife without negating the possibility of women ministering to men in general. For this reason, the submission passages in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Peter do not clearly address the issue of women in ministry. They deal with earthly roles within the family rather than the spiritual role of female ministry.

1 Corinthians 14:34-36

Similarly, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 have a husband-wife situation in view, which eliminates it from the debate as well. When the Greek word *gyne* (“woman,” “wife”) is used in the presence of *aner* (“husband”), it usually refers to wives in relation to husbands rather than women in relation to men in general. The word “to submit” reinforces this impression (14:34).

The 1 Corinthians 14 passage is difficult to understand in the first place because 1 Corinthians 11 has already implied that women *did* prophecy in Corinthian worship (cf. 11:5). The very dynamics of 1 Corinthians 11 are created largely because of a situation in which a man's wife is doing something prominent in the presence of other men. She needs to cover her head and be modest in the presence of God, angels, and men who aren't her husband.

In this light 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 cannot be an absolute statement. Otherwise Paul would contradict himself. He would assume that women prophesy in worship only to forbid it later in the same letter! Thus we can't use these verses to support a case against women in ministry.

Women Did Minister to Men!

Regardless of what you think on the husband/wife issue, we *do* see women in the NT ministering to men. Priscilla helps instruct Apollos in Acts 18:26—and she is mentioned *first* before her husband in this instance! Phoebe is a “deacon” of the church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1). This is the same *exact* word used in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8 for church leaders. It is not *deaconess*—it is the masculine form of the word. The church meets in the homes of women like Lydia (Acts 16:15) and Nympha (Col. 4:15). The Junias of Romans 16:7 may even be an apostle.

1 Timothy 2:12-15

Like 1 Corinthians 14, the comment in 1 Timothy 2:12 uses the word *woman/wife* (*gyne*) in the same sentence as *husband/male* (*aner*): “I do not allow a wife/woman to exert authority over a husband/man.” Since the arguments that follow relate to Adam and Eve—a husband-wife pair, it is quite possible that these verses also relate to the marriage relationship. If so, they also would not apply to the issue of women in ministry. In this case we have run out of verses against women taking such roles, and the objections are at an end.

Much ink has been spilt over the precise meaning of these verses. Accordingly, it is easy to get lost in the trees and miss the forest. In the end, we certainly would not want to make 1 Timothy 2:12-15 the key verses in our theology of women. We believe that God inspired these verses to meet the needs of the ancient Ephesians. But if we were to take them as absolute statements, they would imply that Christ’s death did not atone for all sins—in short, blasphemy.

A literal translation of the Greek of 2:14-15 reads, “The wife/woman, being deceived, has come to be in transgression. But *she* will be saved through childbearing, if *they* remain in faith and love and holiness with self-control.” The mention of Eve’s transgression in connection with childbearing alludes to Genesis 3:16. The punishment of Eve’s sin was increased pain in the birth process, a pain that all women continue to experience.

What is difficult is that 1 Timothy uses a tense that implies women are still in transgression as a result of the sin of Eve (the perfect tense), a state from which childbearing frees them. Our faith in Christ cannot allow us to take this comment at face value. Do we really want to argue that women today are still “in transgression” because of the sin of Eve, a state of transgression from which childbearing “saves” them?

1 Timothy is making a point to the Ephesians here, but it cannot negate the fact that Christ atoned for *all* transgressions, including the sin of Eve. To say otherwise is nothing short of blasphemy! This is scarcely a verse on which to base our theology. This passage likely reflects the issue of false teaching with which the Pastoral Epistles are so strongly concerned (cf. 2 Tim. 3:6). The statement of 1 Tim 2 here is *heretical* if we take it absolutely. We get the suspicion that these verses are so strong because some women at Ephesus were somehow serving as catalysts for false teaching there.

Nor can we use the order of creation in 1 Timothy 2:13 as an absolute argument: “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:13). We’ve already seen that Galatians 3:28 ultimately undoes the differentiation between male and female made in creation. The birth order of Adam and Eve relates to the earthly and physical—clearly a less significant element in the equation than our spiritual destiny in Christ.

Nor are *all* women more gullible than *all* men—such a claim would simply be false. Yet many would use 1 Timothy 2:14 as if it were making such a claim: “Adam was not deceived, but the woman—because she was deceived—has come to be in transgression.” If we don’t view 1 Tim 2:12-15 in the light of specific problems at Ephesus, it leads to tremendous theological problems and indeed falsehoods—not preferable destinations by any means. Do we really want to take this passage with all its difficulties and make it the centerpiece for our theology of women?

Does God Want Even More?

The Wesleyan Church does not have an official position on how Christians should apply biblical passages on headship in the home to our lives today. Some Wesleyans believe the ideal is for the husband to be the leader of the home just as he was in the ancient context of such passages. Others interpret Ephesians 5:21 to teach mutual submission of husband and wife, with husbands submitting to wives at the same time that wives submit to husbands. While the issue of women in ministry does not rise or fall on this issue, we wonder if God doesn't have more in mind for His people than a legalistic "husband heads the home" approach in every situation.

Unlike today, there was nothing distinctly Christian in Paul's day in saying that a husband was the head of the wife. Aristotle says the same things: "The head of the household rules over both wife and children, and rules over both as free members of the household... His rule over his wife is like that of a statesman over fellow citizens... The male is naturally fitter to command than the female, except where there is a departure from nature" (*Politics*, 1.1259a-b).

In other words, Paul is talking like any non-Christian when he speaks of male headship. These comments sound distinctly Christian in our world, but they were not distinctly Christian in Paul's day. It is when Paul moves toward the equality of the sexes in Christ that he is being uniquely Christian. Galatians 3:28 is uniquely Christian. 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 is distinctly Christian. Here is the spiritual dimension in contrast to the earthly.

Let us return to the institution of slavery. The heavenly principle was "neither slave nor free," even though there were slaves and free. Despite the heavenly principle, passages like Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1 did not question the institution of slavery. They assumed it.

With regard to women, the heavenly principle is "not male and female" even though there are male and female. Despite the heavenly principle, passages like Ephesians 5:2-33 and Colossians 3:18-19 did not question the cultural roles of their day regarding husband and wife. They assumed them.

The early church, often persecuted, did not work toward societal change. They were concerned to get the gospel out and to survive persecution. And God, ever so patient, met them at their needs. He inspired books like 1 Peter that encouraged individuals like slaves who were unjustly treated and women whose husbands were not believers.

But in the 1800's we moved further on the heavenly agenda with regard to slavery. At that time some did use the Bible in favor of slavery. The Wesleyan Methodist Church was one of several groups that saw where the Spirit was leading not only on the issue of slavery, but also on what God was doing for women. These were individuals who argued that women should be able to vote, and they accepted the women God called to ministry.

Since World War II, the rise of secular feminism has caused a backlash in some against women in ministry—even in our own church. The more biblical response, however, would be for us and for society in general to move further toward Kingdom values that are pleasing to the Lord! Let's not allow Satan to trick us into opposing things God approves, just because our society has come to adopt some of them too. Can't God change more than just the church? Can't He change the world too? Admittedly, radical secular feminism is often linked with worldly pursuit of power and self.

Overreaction to the unchristian elements, however, can cause us to miss what the Spirit has constantly been doing to elevate the full personhood, value, and leadership of women since Bible times.

3. We favor the possibility of women in all positions of ministry because God has called women in the past and continues to call women to ministry today.

Many of these have the gifts and graces to go along with such calls. Given that women prophesied and ministered in the New Testament church, by what authority could any Christian validly oppose these women who are called—simply because they are women? Do we really want to oppose the Holy Spirit? Quench not the Spirit! Of course, some may be mistaken about their call. But so are some men. The spiritual principle is to treat them both the same, because spiritually there is no “male and female.”

Now we believe that many of those who limit women in ministry do so sincerely and because they think such a position is God’s will. But Paul also talks about individuals who have a zeal for God without knowledge (Rom. 10:2). Paul’s Jewish opponents had good biblical bases for opposing his message too—probably better Old Testament proof texts than Paul had. After all, things like circumcision and purity rules were clearly taught in the Old Testament. Paul’s opponents were more “literal” and “fundamental” in their use of Scripture than he was.

But Paul was not just a man of the letter. He was a man of the Spirit. Paul said that his “letteral” opponents took pride in flesh rather than Spirit (Gal. 6:13). The same is true of those who oppose women in ministry—this is earthly, fleshly thinking. They are focusing on the earthly, physical “vessel” of the woman rather than her fully redeemed spirit. The gospel boldly proclaims that women “in Christ” are spiritually no different from men. Those who preclude women from equal spiritual ministry are thus thinking with their flesh, not the Spirit.

4. We favor the possibility of women in all positions of ministry because it makes sense, while to oppose women in ministry as a matter of principle doesn’t make sense.

Whether men like it or not, women are just as smart (often they’re smarter). Women mature more quickly than men as a rule. Women tend to be more loving than men (and often more Christian in their behavior, since love is the fulfillment of the law). The men of Paul’s day more often than not would not have accepted these claims, but no one today can seriously dispute them unless they avoid a lot of women.

If a woman has gifts of leadership, gifts of speaking, and spiritual insight, there is no logical reason why we shouldn’t actively seek for her to be leader and authority over men who are less gifted, less insightful, and who have less spiritual discernment. This is just good sense, bottom line. To place a less competent male over a more spiritual and gifted female—simply because of physical differences not particularly known for thinking or spirituality—well, it’s pretty hard to make any sense of it.

We can rationalize our opposition, but it’s just bad thinking. Does God promote bad thinking? Is it really God’s character to make up rules just for their own sake, even though they don’t make any sense (cf. Mark 2:27)? Sometimes God stoops to our

weakness, like when He allowed divorce in the Old Testament (Deut. 24:1; Matt. 19:8), but ultimately He works His people toward the ideal. This is the age of the ideal!

Jesus and Paul regularly teach us not to put God in a box with our interpretations of the rules. The New Testament authors consistently interpreted the Old Testament spiritually more than literally. So if a woman senses God's call, if a community of believers sees the evidence of that call, if the woman demonstrates leadership ability, why would we oppose this woman ministering? It would make no sense to oppose her.

No rational argument can be made against the possibility of women in ministry other than the fact that people often don't accept a woman minister. So then, do we push the lowest common denominator because of the shortsightedness, ignorance, or even sinfulness of our people? Does God want us to accommodate ignorance in the church? When God is pushing us toward heaven, do we acquiesce to earthly, fleshly thinking? God forbid!

If some men feel intimidated by a woman God has called, we need to help them work through it, not reinforce their insecurity. If a woman feels like her comfort zone is called into question by another woman taking leadership, we need to help her grow, not support her weakness. Obviously everything must be done in love, and God even accommodated the weakness of the early Christians on these issues from time to time. In the times of this ignorance God winked at these things, but now calls us to end earthly mindedness and move further in the fulfillment of the gospel.

5. We favor the possibility of women in all positions of ministry because we don't want to be guilty of submitting to the "weak and poor elements of the world" (Gal. 4:3, 9).

It is instructive to look carefully at what Paul is saying when he mentions the weak elements of the world in Galatians. He is referring to elements of the Old Testament Scripture. In Galatians 4:10 he refers to "days, months, seasons, and years," just as in the rest of the letter he refers to circumcision (e.g. Gal. 5:2). Colossians uses this same phrase—"the elements of the world"—in reference to the Jewish Sabbath (Col. 2:16) and probably the food laws of Leviticus (Col. 2:16, 21).

The amazing thing is that all these things are required by the Old Testament—the only Bible Paul had at this time. Despite the clear *literal* meaning of these texts, Paul knew that the *Spirit* was leading to something higher and more heavenly. To continue to follow the letter was to submit to the elemental spirits of the world.

The same applies to the issue of women in the church. If we oppose the possibility of women in ministry, we are gravitating toward issues of earthly administration and the physical body. We are basing our theology on the limitations of the human and earthly. We are allowing ourselves to become enslaved to the weak and "beggarly" elements of the world.

But we must set our eyes toward Jesus and toward heaven. God is a God of the possibilities of heaven, not of the limitations of earth. He breaks the molds of this world and moves us toward the next. Therefore, let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus—the author and finisher of our faith!