

The Role of Women in the Church

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In the last few decades of the 20th century, there has been considerable confusion about what women can and cannot do, regarding positions or responsibilities in a church. There have been many interpretations of scripture to justify one extreme or another. At one end of the scale, there are denominations that do not allow women to lead a choir, teach children's Bible lessons, or hold any position, ecclesiastical or secular, in which males are expected to follow their instructions. At the other end of the scale, there are churches that take scriptures about women not teaching in a congregational setting, and interpret these as simply culturally conditioned and time-bound, thus appointing women to serve in any capacity within the church, including the office of priest, elder or pastor.

For the body of Christ to function effectively and do God's work, everyone needs to understand and agree on how to operate. How do we know what is right when it comes to the role of women in the church? To answer this question, we need to go to the source of right direction, the Bible.

In the Old Testament, although women could not receive the sign of the covenant, which was circumcision, they nonetheless shared with men in the blessings. These blessings included long life, prosperity, children and land (Dt. 5:29-33). Women also shared equally with men in the blessings of worship by resting on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10), listening to the reading of the law (Dt. 31:9-13; *note verse 12*), and rejoicing before the Lord. Women were never despised as "uncircumcised". In fact, the introduction of circumcision as a covenant sign in Gen. 17:10-14 is followed immediately by a special blessing upon Sarah as a, "mother of nations" (vs. 15-21).

At the time of Nehemiah, when the people were gathered to hear the law, it was not just the men who were in attendance (Neh. 8:2). Women were to be present in the worship assemblies of God's people in order to hear His word (Deut.16:13-14) and they were expected to obey it (Dt. 13:6-11; 17:2, 5; 29:18; 2Chr. 15:12-13).

The participation of women in the religious life of Israel extended beyond the hearing and obeying of the law. Several women such as Hannah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Sarah, are mentioned as praying to God (Gen. 25:22; 30:6, 22), and having their prayers answered. A Shunammite woman asked her husband to set up a guest room for Elisha and later to arrange for a servant to escort her to the house of the prophet (2Kgs. 4:9-10; 20-23). Even when Christ was a child, a female prophetess named Anna was teaching about him in the temple (Lk. 2:36-38).

Women also had a great religious influence on their children. The book of Proverbs admonishes children to heed the instruction of both father and mother (Prov. 1:8).

It is also interesting that the Bible gives us the names of mothers who taught the children who later became great spiritual leaders such as Moses, Samuel, Jesus, John the Baptizers, and Timothy. Undoubtedly, these women made a significant contribution to the success of their sons' ministry, and Paul specifically referred to this in his comments about Timothy,

When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you (Timothy), which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also (2Tm. 1:5; *comment in parenthesis added; NKJV used throughout unless otherwise noted*).

It is interesting to note that a widow, who is no longer under the authority of her husband, could make her vows to God without any interference (Num. 30:9). Women, like men, could take the Nazarite vow which involved a high degree of devotion (Num. 6:2-21). Also, in certain instances women were expected to act independently by bringing their own sacrifices (Lev. 12:1-6; 15:29).

Hannah played a major role in bringing a sacrifice to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. She also presented her child to Eli, and later gave a psalm of praise (1Sam. 1:24-27; 2:1-10). In his book entitled "Woman in Old Testament Worship," Clarence Vos offers an insightful comment regarding Hannah:

It is evident that Hannah was at the sanctuary, and near enough to the priest to have her seemingly unusual conduct observed by him. There is therefore, no hint that women were supposed to be kept at a distance from the sanctuary. Finally, after Eli rebuked her it does not seem improper that she defended herself, and her defense was immediately accepted. In all this we receive the impression that Hannah moved as one who enjoyed a large margin of religious freedom and respect (Delft, Judels & Brinkman, 1968).

Women contributed to the sanctuary in two ways: through their gifts and services. They brought their gifts for the building of the tabernacle, not through their fathers or husbands but individually and personally (Ex. 35:22). Special mention is made of the things women made with their hands (Ex. 35:25-26) and of the laver of bronze,

He made the laver of bronze and its base of bronze, from the bronze mirrors of the serving women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting (Ex. 38:8).

Women played a vital role in the choir of the tabernacle,

They have seen Your procession, O God, the procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary.
²⁵ The singers went before, the players on instruments *followed after*; among *them were* the maidens playing timbrels (Ps. 68:24-25).

Women were also involved in national religious songs and dances,

Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances (Ex. 15:20).

Miriam was not the only woman who served as a prophetess (Neh. 6:14), Deborah also served as both a prophetess and a judge (Jgs. 4:4). There is no indication that the people of Israel or the commander of the army, Barak, resented the spiritual or civil leadership of Deborah because she was a woman. Another woman, Athaliah, served as queen (though a wicked usurper; 2Kgs. 11:3).

In the example of the prophetess Huldah, King Josiah sent the high priest and several of his notable leaders to Huldah,

"Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great *is* the wrath of the LORD that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us." 14 So Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. (She dwelt in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter) And they spoke with her (2Kgs. 22:13-14).

The fact that King Josiah sent these men, not to Jeremiah or Zephaniah who were contemporary prophets, but to the prophetess, strongly indicates that in Old Testament times there was little, if any, prejudice against the spiritual leadership of women. The book of Joel predicted a future widespread manifestation of the gift of prophecy among both men and women (Jl. 2:28).

A woman could minister as a prophet because a prophet was primarily a communicator of God's will, but historically she could not function as a priest because a priest was appointed to act as the representative of the people to God and of God to the people. The role of priest was established under the hierarchical structure given by God (1Cor. 11:3). Clarence Vos again states,

Although it is clear from the O.T. that women took a different role in Israel's worship than men, there is no evidence to consider her an inferior creature. As a member of the religious community we can view her as taking an equal place among the people of God. It was not her task to lead the family or tribe in worship; normally this was done by the patriarch, or the eldest male member. That a male was appointed to this function no doubt rested on the fact that the male was considered the "first-born" of the human family...a motif discernable in the creation story of Genesis 2 (Delft, Judels & Brinkman, 1968).

However in the absence of a baptized male, it is important that a female instruct by good example (2Tm.1:5; 1Cor.7:16).

Now let's move into the New Testament to see what differences, if any, there were toward women in the church. As mentioned earlier, there are two opposing opinions, and therefore, we need to have a proper understanding on this very important subject. After all, God is not the author of confusion (1Cor. 14:33).

First, we'll look at how Jesus Christ related to women. We will then look at how the early church related to women after Christ's death.

Most Bible scholars acknowledge that Jesus' treatment of women represented a radical break with the Jewish cultural tradition of his time. In the centuries following the close of

the Old Testament, the subordinate role of women was hardened a great deal. Women became relegated to a position of marked inferiority. In religious life, contrary to the Old Testament practice, women were largely excluded from participation in public worship, being considered unfit to learn and inappropriate to teach. One scholar, named Joachim Jeremias writes: "Jesus knowingly overthrew custom when he allowed women to follow him." He also calls the presence of women in the inner circle of Jesus' followers "an unprecedented happening in the history of that time."

The prevailing rabbinic attitude toward the role of women in the temple or synagogue is reflected in Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah's comment, "The men come to learn, the women come to hear." This same Rabbi goes on to say, "if a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery!" This depreciation of women was such that men, especially orthodox rabbis, would not speak to them in public.

In contrast to this prevailing attitude, Christ viewed women not in terms of gender, age or marital status, but in terms of their relation to God our Father,

For whoever does the will of my Father in the heavens, is my brother and sister and mother (Mt. 12:50; RNT).

Here, Jesus identifies as disciples and members of God's kingdom any person, male or female, who does the will of the Father.

The description of the crippled woman in Luke 13:16 as a "daughter of Abraham" also indicates the value Jesus gave to women. The title "son of Abraham" was commonly used to emphasize the worth of a man in the covenant community, while the term "daughter of Abraham" was virtually unknown.

According to rabbinic thinking, Jesus should not have spoken to the Samaritan woman in John 4:7-30 for three reasons. First, she was a Samaritan (i.e. non-Jewish). Second, she was a woman. Third, she was a sinner. What is very revealing is that Christ considered her capable of grasping important truths such as "living water" (Jn. 4:10), the correct place of worship (Jn. 4:21), and the spiritual nature of God (Jn. 4:24). She was also the first person to whom Christ revealed himself as Messiah. She not only understood this but also was the first messenger to witness for him to the Samaritans. Her success in this is emphasized by John, who says,

But many of the Samaritans from the city believed in him through the statement of the women, testifying, "He told me all that I had done" (Jn. 4:39; RNT).

A Canaanite woman sought Christ in order that her daughter could be healed. She kept following him until the disciples became so irritated that they begged Christ to send her away. Instead, he chose to talk with her and reveal her faith. She understood that Jesus' first responsibility was to Israel but she also believed he would bestow upon her "the crumbs", which represented Christ solving her problem. This was "small" in

comparison to the much larger issues that Christ was dealing with in the nation of Israel (Mt. 15:21-28).

In Luke 7:36-50, we see an example of a woman's faith and love in action. While Simon would have never permitted such a "sinner" to touch him, Christ accepted her public demonstration of love and gratitude to show that God is not a respecter of persons based on gender, marital status, or even the enormity of one's sins.

Contrary to the rabbinic custom of generally avoiding the mention of women in their teachings, Christ refers to them often and always in positive ways to illustrate the principles of God's kingdom. For example, a woman mixing leaven in flour (Mt. 13:33) to illustrate that it is God's will that His kingdom grow and include everyone; a similar theme would be that "none would perish, but everyone come to repentance" (2Pet. 3:9).

In another parable, a woman is looking for a lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10) showing God's concern for sinners and His joy when they repent. Wise and foolish bridesmaids (Mt. 25:1-13) illustrate the need for constant readiness and preparedness for Christ's return. A persistent woman confronting an unscrupulous judge teaches us the need for persevering in prayer, and not giving up on God or His way of life (Lk. 18:1-8). A poor widow who gave her last penny is used to show us that God is not impressed by what we may regard as great works but rather by our giving up what is so important to us in order to do His work (Mk. 12:38-44).

Contrary to the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer, who would rather burn the scriptures than teach them to women, Christ took time to teach Mary and praised her for laying aside the usual concerns of women to listen to Him (Lk. 10:42). Later on, when Lazarus died, Christ took time to teach Martha that the resurrection of the dead would be made possible by the work that he was doing on behalf of the Father (Jn. 11:25-27). Her response in verse 27 was very interesting because it is almost identical to what Peter said in Matthew 16:16,

And Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God (RNT).

It is interesting to note that whenever the New Testament speaks about service being rendered directly to Jesus, it is either by angels or women. For instance, after the 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness and being tempted by Satan, God's angels came and ministered to him (Mt. 4:11; Mk. 1:13). However, in all the other New Testament examples, it is women that are ministering to Christ.

After Christ healed Peter's mother-in-law, she arose and ministered unto them (Mt. 8:15). Luke 8:3 mentions that a group of women followed Christ and ministered unto him of their substance. On two occasions, it is recorded that Martha served Christ (Lk. 10:40; Jn. 12:2).

In all these examples, the Greek word used to describe the ministering of these women is, *diakonia* (SGD# 1248), which is a verb and refers to the personal and dedicated service rendered to another. It is from the root of this verb that the English word

“deacon” is derived. This would include the preparing and serving of food, especially since the literal translation of *diakonia* means “to wait at table.”

Some of the women who followed Christ during his ministry assumed a prominent role at the time of his death. At the risk of their lives, they followed him to his execution and then to his burial place. They showed their loyalty and love for him by returning later to embalm his body with spices and ointment (Lk. 23:55-56; Mt. 27:59-61; Mk. 15:47-16:1). They were rewarded by being the first to encounter the resurrected Christ (Mt. 28:9; Mk. 16:9; Jn. 20:14-15). They were then commissioned to break the news of the resurrection to the disciples (Mk. 16:7; Mt. 28:7, 10).

These same women were also present among the disciples during the period between the resurrection and Pentecost, and it would be logical that they were among those who received the holy spirit at Pentecost.

After Christ’s ministry was finished, women continued to play a major role in the body of Christ. One of the early converts in Jerusalem was Mary, the mother of John-Mark, and she offered her house as a meeting place (Ac. 12:12). The first European convert was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, who was a seller of purple goods (Ac. 16:14). Another interesting woman is mentioned in Acts 16:16-19. Presumably, after she was freed from a demon she would have repented and continued to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In Thessalonica and Berea among the many who believed there were, “not a few Greek women of high standing” (Ac. 17:4, 12). In Athens one woman, Damaris, is specifically mentioned among the few who believed (Ac. 17:34). In Corinth, Priscilla, together with her husband Aquila, took an active role in instructing the learned Apollos (Ac. 18:2, 26).

The Apostle Paul who has sometimes been unjustly accused of being discriminatory toward women, repeatedly mentions many women in his letters who were worthy of commendation for the special work they were doing in the church (Rom. 16; Phlp. 4:2-3; 1Cor. 16:19). There is no doubt that the church, after the time of Christ’s ministry, followed his example by including women in many aspects of serving. This service was conducted in the local church as well as a part of the broader commission of, “proclaiming the gospel to all nations” (Mk. 13:10).

Women, especially widows, became active in the charitable services of the church, communicating Godly love by deeds of mercy and hospitality. By the time Paul wrote 1Timothy, widows were recognized as a special group within the church which is why the apostle writes,

Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, *and not unless* she has been the wife of one man (1Tm. 5:9).

Presumably this enrollment would have entitled her to some financial assistance when/if necessary. The ministry performed by these widows included praying for the brethren as well as the greater church commission (1Tm. 5:5). They were also doing good in

every way, as it says in 1 Timothy 5:10. The book of Acts reports the story of a woman named Tabitha (Dorcas) who, “was full of good works and acts of charity” (Ac. 9:36). Her acts of charity included making clothes for the poor as we see from reading verse 39.

Closely related to the ministry of widows is that of women who became known as “deaconesses.” This ministry is highlighted by Paul’s reference to Phoebe, “a deaconess of the church of Cenchreae....she has been a helper of many and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:1-2). The word translated “servant” in verse 1 is from the Greek word *diakonos* (SGD #1249). It is also used in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13 to describe the office of a deacon, or deaconess.

Female deacons were needed in the early centuries when the sexes could not mingle freely. According to historical commentaries, they performed a great variety of services in the care of women, including assistance at the baptism and burial of women, caring for sick women at home, etc. Historically they did not function as heads of the community, but served in a role auxiliary to that of the male leadership.

Women were also involved in helping and supporting the broader commission given to God’s church. In Romans 16, Paul greets several women whose endeavors contributed significantly to the greater work of the church. Outstanding among them is Priscilla and her husband Aquila. Of them Paul says,

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,⁴ who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.⁵ Likewise *greet* the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ (Rom. 16:3-5).

Paul refers to this couple as “fellow-workers”, which is the same term he used to describe Titus and Timothy.

Priscilla and Aquila lived in Rome until about 49 C.E. when they were forced to move to Corinth after Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (Ac. 18:1-3). From Corinth, they moved their tent making business first to Ephesus and then back to Rome (Ac. 18:18-26; 1Cor. 16:19). Priscilla must have been very well grounded in God’s word as she was involved in teaching the great orator Apollos the way of God more accurately (Ac. 18:26).

Other women greeted by Paul were: Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, all of whom are described as working hard in the Lord (Rom. 16:6, 12). The term Paul uses here is descriptive of the toil in proclaiming God’s truth (1Cor. 15:10; Phlp. 2:16; 1Tm. 4:10). In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul mentions two other women, Euodia and Syntyche, as persons who, “have labored side by side with me in the Gospel!”

Finally, the New Testament mentions women functioning as prophets. Acts 21:9 speaks of the four daughters of Philip, “who prophesied.” In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul recognizes the presence of women who prophesied. The exact nature of their prophetic ministry is

not clearly defined, but it appears to have been to serve the church through edification, encouragement, counseling and consolation. In 1Corinthians 14:3-4 Paul explains,

But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. ⁴ He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

A good working knowledge of prophecy can be very encouraging when people are feeling depressed by events around them. Many prophecies are very positive when we understand the plan of God more completely and correctly. So women with a good knowledge of God's word, including prophecy, can be very encouraging to others.

In the New Testament, we see that Christ treated women as persons of equal worth to men by respecting their intellectual and spiritual capacities, by admitting them into his fellowship and by teaching them the truths of God's kingdom. The New Testament church followed Christ's example by including women and they appear to have joined the church in large numbers. They were involved in many important areas including the organization of charitable services for the needy, learning God's truth and sharing it with others, and working hard as fellow-workers alongside the men commissioned to preach the gospel. They also shared in the prophetic ministry of edification, encouragement and consolation.

This document is the collaborative work of individuals who believe God's truth should be given freely (Mt. 10:8; 1Cor. 2:12; 2Cor.11:7; Rom. 10:14-21) and the message of the one true God should be made available to all nations (Mt. 24:14) as a prerequisite to the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings (Mt. 17:10; 19:17; Mk. 9:11; Lk. 1:17; Rev. 19:11-16).

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