**Lesson: Women in Ministry**

There has long been debate among leaders of different evangelical denominations about the role of women in ministry. Apparently, theologians are equally divided (almost 50-50) on the topic of ordaining women to be pastors or priests. Specifically, the disagreement centers around a passage where the apostle Paul instructed Timothy concerning women leaders in the church: Do not allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent (1 CO 14:35; 1 TI 2:11–12). It is an extension of the idea that the man was to be head of the household and of the wife, and that women were to submit to men (EPH 5:22; 1 CO 11:3; 1 PE 3:6–7). This is the substance of the position that men should be leaders of churches. However, Paul also wrote that a woman can be a prophetess (1 CO 11:5) and Peter wrote that a woman should take charge of the spiritual education in the home if the man is not knowledgeable in the ways of the Lord (1 PE 3:1).

We cannot discount the applicability of this policy to the era in which the New Testament was written and the hermeneutics associated with that scripture. No doubt, women were subordinate to men to the extent that they were not permitted to testify in court or be leaders in the temple. Further, Paul had encountered churches where women were injecting themselves into the dialogue and interrupting the general order. It follows that the guidance was specific to a perceived problem and a particular time, general to their culture. Thus, there may be reasons that Paul wrote this guidance to Timothy and in other epistles.

But does that direction apply today? Obviously, women played major and critical roles throughout the Old and New Testaments. It seems unreasonable to suggest that such a policy must be enforced in the church today. I mean, it’s not as if God will condemn all churches and their congregations which employ women for leadership roles, seeing how these churches are filled with faithful Christians, especially given shortages in the clergy. There are many traditions being practiced to this day by certain denominations, which is all well and good as long as traditions of men are not treated equally with key doctrines of the faith.

* COL 2:8,20–22 ~ Beware that you are not spoiled by errant philosophies or vain deceptions, originating from worldly traditions or principles and not from Christ. You are in Christ and not the world, so why submit to its rules? You are not subject to ordinances that are the doctrines and commandments of men (such as don’t touch, taste, or use). Those traditions are destined to die out. People may appear reasonable with their self-imposed worship, false humility, and harsh treatment of the body, but these lack value in restraining the sinful flesh.
* 2 TH 2:15 ~ Fellow Christians, stand fast in your faith and hold onto those traditions that you have been taught in God’s Word, through the prophets and apostles.

While the ordination of women is still a subject of controversy, there is no reason for the church at large to allow this to divide the body of Christ. There are a great many ancillary issues that are debated among evangelicals such as how to conduct baptism, the legality of birth control, and the rules of tithing; these issues need not create dissent or division. Yes, let us discuss and debate such things in light of scripture, with humility and respect. But some practices are not essential to the faith, since they do not affect one’s salvation. Like Paul wrote: All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify (1 CO 10:20–31).

God bestows spiritual gifts with which we can serve. Clearly, God is not preferential about whom He calls, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (GAL3:28), for we all are one in Christ! Jesus said, “Many are called but few are chosen” (MAT 22:14). Everyone is called to faith and to service, but one must be motivated to serve in order to receive a commission directly from the Holy Spirit, in which case He will equip you with the knowledge, skills, and spiritual gifts to ensure success. Since people vary in their gifts, we should endeavor to discover them and cultivate them. God also gives us free will to choose our vocation, and even if it does not exercise an intrinsic gift or talent, we can diligently learn the skills and obtain the knowledge and God will guide our path and secure our victory. It stands to reason that any and all gifts are fair game, available to anyone dedicated to pursuing and nurturing them in service to the Good Shepherd and His flock.

* 1 CO 12:4–12,26 ~ There are a variety of spiritual gifts, but only one Spirit. There are different ways of administering but only one Lord. There are different operations, but the same God who works through them. The Spirit is manifested in some way for everyone to use productively. Some people have received wisdom, some knowledge, some faith, all from the same Spirit. Some people have the ability to heal, others to work miracles, others to prophesy, others to discern spirits, others to speak foreign tongues. But all of them are working with the same Spirit, who divides power among His people as He chooses. Just as one body has many members so is Christ one body with many members. When one member suffers, all suffer; when one member is honored, all are honored.
* EPH 4:11–13 ~ God gave some the abilities of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and/or teachers for the work of the ministry, the edifying of the saints, the perfecting of the body of Christ, and the unity of faith. Each can impart the knowledge of the Son of God, who was a perfect man, so that we could take on the characteristics of Christ.

Obviously, women of the Bible have been integral in the communication of God’s will, purposes, and law, not to mention being leaders, prophets, and teachers. God calls us and directs His people, men and women alike. For example, the prophet Joel proclaimed that both sons and daughters would prophesy (JOE 2:28). Below are listed some of the great women who prophesied in the Bible or who were chosen by God to be leaders.

Deborah was a prophetess and judge over the nation of Israel (JDG 4:4) during the era of the judges (JDG 4—5), prior to the period of the kings. She was quite a formidable military tactician as well, instrumental in the defeat of Sisera and his Canaanite army. Esther was the queen of Persia and favored wife of Xerxes. While her foster father and close relative Mordecai was the strategist, Esther became the mechanism. A very significant message from Mordecai should be heeded by everyone when he said to Esther, “Who knows whether you have come into this kingdom for such a time as this” (EST 4:14b). Esther took charge and prevented the eradication of Jews by Haman, the king’s second. Xerxes had Haman hanged on the gallows he’d built for Mordecai who then became second to the king. This was a pivotal event in Jewish history, celebrated to this day during the Feast of Purim (EST 9:20–32).

Many prophetesses in the Old Testament deserve mentioning. Miriam was a prophetess (EXO 15:20), the elder sister of Moses and Aaron. She intervened with the daughter of Pharoah to provide a Hebrew midwife (who just happened to be their mother) to nurse her baby brother. She also led a music ministry with the Israelites in the Sinai desert (EXO 15:20–21). Hannah was barren, but because of her faith she became the mother of Samuel the prophet, who she dedicated to the church to honor God for giving her a son (1 SA 1:1–28). Abigail was a widow that David married before becoming king; she predicted that David would rule over Israel (1 SA 25:28–31). Huldah was a prophetess who foretold the desolation of Jerusalem (2 KI 22:14–20).

Notable women from the Old Testament played a crucial part in God’s plan by virtue of the fact that they were among the ancestors of Christ. First, we have Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah; she disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced him after being denied an heir when her husband died. This incestuous affair led to a pregnancy and the birth of one of Jesus’s progenitors (GEN 38). Next is Rahab, a harlot from the city of Jericho who hid two spies in her home and was spared when the city was sacked (JOS 2). She married an Israelite and they had a son named Boaz who would marry a widow from Moab named Ruth (RUT 2—4). Ruth bore a son named Obed, grandfather of King David. David would have an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, and would murder her husband to take her as his wife. Their second son was Solomon, another king and forefather of Jesus. Clearly, God employs women to fulfill His purpose, even if the situation involves incest, prostitution, adultery, murder, or a foreigner. Because they were women of faith, they became God’s vessels regardless of their past or gender.

Turning to the New Testament, we find the prophetess and temple servant Anna who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah at His circumcision (LUK 2:36–38). Dorcas was a charitable woman of God whom Peter raised from the dead (ACT 9:36–43). Phebe was a deaconess at the church in Cenchrea near Corinth (ROM 16:1–2). Priscilla with her husband Aquila were mentored by the apostle Paul. They were very influential in the early Christian church, and held services in their home (1 CO 16:19). The couple instructed Apollos who later became a close companion of Paul during his travels (ACT 18:28). Philip the evangelist had four daughters who were prophetesses (ACT 21:8–9).

Certainly, we mustn’t forget the women who were witnesses to Christ’s glory. Funny how the custom of the time was to disallow women to testify or hold office, yet the first to behold and announce the resurrection of Jesus were exclusively women. Let’s start with the women at the cross during Christ’s crucifixion. Note that only one of the apostles are mentioned as being in attendance: John. But there were at least four women present: Mary Magdalene, Mary the wife of Cleophas, Salome the mother of James and John, and Jesus’s mother Mary (MAT 27:55–56; MAR 15:40; JOH 19:25). Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord (MAR 16:9). She had been joined that morning by Mary the mother of James (the lesser), Joanna, and Salome, and possibly other women who went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’s corpse with sweet spices and who found the tomb empty (MAR 16:1; LUK 24:1–10). Thus, the apostles were notified by female witnesses who had been spreading this great news all over town before the men had breakfast.

Jesus’s mother Mary was very influential as a leader in the early church and during His ministry. She was among the first to recognize Christ publicly, when she told servants at the wedding of Cana to do whatever Jesus tells them (JOH 2:2–5), and His ministry gained traction. Surely, Mary was well aware of who Jesus was from the moment the angel Gabriel announced to her that she would be impregnated by the Holy Spirit (LUK 1:26–38). No doubt, Mary was a witness throughout her adult life which continued until her death.

It makes no sense to set limitations concerning who can serve, for that would be up to the Holy Spirit. If a person, male or female, receives His call, he or she is obliged to heed that call if they are sincerely committed. I have been to churches with female pastors or teachers and got to know quite a few; they received the same education as male pastors and teachers. Certainly, every leader has a cadre of people to assist with church operations, be they elders, trustees, stewards, or instructors. It would be difficult for a church to succeed if they were compelled to hire only males for these positions. But should we draw the line when it comes to pastors or executives? Maybe there are roles better suited for men or women, but serving God in whatever capacity would be fitting and right for anybody. If a person has received sufficient training for the job, knows the Bible backwards and forwards, and possesses the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who else would you want in charge?

As a psychotherapist and instructor by trade, I have mentored plenty of interns and students in my time and found no difference between the sexes in their capability, integrity, and enthusiasm. Many of them have progressed to positions of leadership and authority, and quite deservedly. I proudly endorsed some them, males and females, and they have excelled. Sometimes they thanked me for my coaching, but I would point them to the Lord who commissioned me. I am especially thankful for those who later received and managed such a commission.

* ROM 2:21–22 ~ If you teach others, don’t you also teach yourself? Don’t you practice what you preach?
* COL 3:16 ~ Remember what Christ taught you and let His words enrich your lives and make you wise. Teach His words to one another. Sing them openly and spiritually in psalms and hymns with thankful hearts.
* HEB 5:12–13 ~ Before you are ready to be teachers you need someone to teach you the principles of the oracles of God. Then you will be ready for milk but not solid food. You will be like babes who must mature to be fully grown before applying your knowledge of right and wrong.
* 2 TH 2:15 ~ Stand strong and hold onto the traditions you have been taught whether by word of mouth or by epistle.
* 2 TI 2:2 ~ Regarding things you have learned from me, commit those things to faithful followers who will then be equipped to teach others.
* 2 TI 3:14–16 ~ Continue in the things you have learned and are assured of, knowing from whom you learned them. Since you were a child, you knew the holy scriptures which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is effective for teaching, for reprimanding, for correcting, and for instruction in the ways of righteousness.

By Andrew V. Barber (Posted 08/01/2021)