

The Question of Women's Rights

A Critique of Charles Ryrie's Position

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Introduction

At the foundation of this present age, God offered the first human beings a choice between two diametrically opposite ways of life. The first way, represented by the tree of life, was freely available to them and led to eternal life through faith and obedience to our Creator. The second, represented by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was advocated by Satan and led to sin, suffering and death.

Ever since our first parents made their fateful and fatal decision in Eden, humanity has struggled with the consequences of knowing (first hand) both good and evil. Adam was to toil over the ground, which was cursed with thorns and thistles. And, Eve was to bring forth children in pain and sorrow; in addition, she was told, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16).¹ Thus began centuries of suffering and oppression for women at the hands of men devoid of the Holy Spirit. With the coming of the Messiah, humanity has found forgiveness, regeneration and the promise of a return to Edenic conditions, but the suffering and oppression have continued as humanity awaits the return of Jesus Christ to end all evil.

Over the centuries, theologians have debated the practical consequences of the gospel message on the status and role of women in the church. Some feel that the Edenic curses are lifted and that women now stand as equals with men in all respects. It is argued that they should be free to teach and to lead congregations as ordained ministers according to the same processes and qualifications that are applied to men. Others feel that men and women still have different, but complementary, roles delegated to them by God. While men and women stand as equals in terms of forgiveness and salvation, it is argued that gender differences remain the same along with the respective roles that God assigned to each.

As Christians, it is essential that we live by the will of God rather than the dictates and whims of society. Many have sought an answer with a solid, biblical foundation. The purpose of this paper is to present and analyze the position adopted by Charles Ryrie regarding the question of women’s rights.²

Ryrie’s Position

Basically, Ryrie is reluctant to offer an opinion regarding the secular area of women’s rights and prefers to focus on questions related to ministry and ordination. He cites Eve’s deception as a possible indication of gullibility on the part of women that would exclude them from political and ecclesiastical leadership. However, the main questions he wishes to focus on are related to the ordination of women (either as ministers or as deaconesses) and the nature of women’s ministry in the local church.

First, Ryrie notes that women in the first century had varying degrees of freedom but that all cultures uniformly expected women to be submissive toward male dominated society. Even in Jewish society, where women enjoyed dignity and responsibility in the home, they had few legal rights. And, while they attended religious assemblies with their families, they had no opportunity to conduct ritual ceremonies or community worship.

Christianity, he contends, offered women an equal opportunity for salvation but not an equal opportunity for spiritual ministry. While women are frequently mentioned in the gospels and the epistles, their role is exclusively limited to supporting the ministries of other men. Indeed, Ryrie

¹All Scriptures are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *You Mean the Bible Says That?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 33-44.

is emphatic that the absence of women among the leadership of the early church is highly instructive. Although numerous men and women accompanied Jesus and witnessed His death and resurrection, He chose and trained only men among the apostles. And, while women served as hostesses in house churches and actively supported the work of the church, the leadership of the congregations was always given to the men.

Ryrie acknowledges that in Christ Jesus “[there] is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28); however, he feels that this refers to the equality of spiritual status before God and not an equality of spiritual activity. Otherwise, he points out, Christianity would also have erased master-slave distinctions among believers, which it did not do. Men and women were still expected to fulfill their respective roles, and for Ryrie, this means that women should be managing the home and not managing the church (1 Tim 5:14, Tit 2:4-5).

Turning to the issue of restrictions on women’s ministry, Ryrie addresses several basic points starting with the distinction between prophesying and preaching. Ryrie maintains that prophesying and preaching are distinguished from each other and are not the same activity. Prophesying involves delivering a message from God, while preaching involves studying God’s revelation to understand it and then communicating the result. Throughout the New Testament, the role of prophet, pastor, and teacher are distinct.

While he acknowledges that women did pray and prophesy in public (1 Cor 11:5), he stresses that Paul restricted women from speaking and teaching in the churches (1 Cor 14:34, 1 Tim 2:12). He conjectures that Paul was aware of women prophesying in church but that his comments concerning women wearing veils was not an indication that he approved of their prophesying during services. Thus, even if a woman gave an occasional prophecy during church, women were not to function as teachers or preachers on a regular basis. As Ryrie says, “The scriptural ideal is that women should not lead in any way in public worship.”³

By way of concession, Ryrie does acknowledge that modern circumstances do allow women more opportunity to exercise their gifts than in the early church. He sees no problem with women leading a Bible class for school-aged children or adult women. If necessity requires a woman to assume a teaching role over other men, he feels that she must be prepared to give it up when a qualified man is found.

As far as ordaining deaconesses is concerned, Ryrie finds no scriptural support. He feels that the passage detailing the qualities of elders and deacons mentions the wives of the deacons and not deaconesses per se (1 Tim 3:11). He says this is supported by the fact that Paul’s comments about deacon’s wives occur within the context of the qualities of the deacons and not as a separate category at the end of the passage. In Romans 16:1, Ryrie notes that Phoebe is simply called a *diakonon* (servant) as a description of her work instead of using the feminine definite article or the feminine *diakonissa* (deaconess) as a title or office within the congregation. In addition, Ryrie asserts that deaconesses are not seen in church history until the third century.

In conclusion, Ryrie feels that the proper role of women is that of homemaker and not church leader. While women are saved by grace on an equal basis with men, their service and function within the church is limited as far as teaching and leading other men are concerned. The responsibility for leading and teaching the church falls to men, who should be diligent to fulfill their God given responsibility.

³ Ryrie, *You Mean the Bible Says That?*, 42.

Analysis

In the twenty-five years since Charles Ryrie wrote about women's rights, the world has become a very different place. Today, women can be found in almost every job category in public and private life although they are still not evenly distributed throughout the labor force. Many women choose to work only part-time or prefer jobs that offer greater flexibility to working mothers but have lower pay. Women have demonstrated that they can even serve alongside men in the military, but nagging problems of morale and discipline suggest that we may have taken this concept too far.

In addition, we have learned more about the intrinsic differences between men and women. While the debate over "nature verses nurture" continues unabated, many facts are now much clearer. In spite of humorous claims that the sexes are different species from different planets, it is clear that men and women have much more in common than some would have us believe. Yet, we are different in significant ways. We react differently to medications. Our brains are physically different although no one can say for sure what that means. Our respective sex hormones have a profound impact on our temperament, physical stature and life span.

Although we are both made in God's image with an equal potential for salvation, it is clear that men and women have been optimized for different roles. This does not mean that one gender is superior to the other or that we are incapable of fulfilling one another's roles. For example, single parent families can be successful, but two parent families have certain advantages because of gender differences. It could be argued that men tend to be more assertive in public settings and are less likely to compromise during conflict over principles. At best, these generalities may help explain why God has chosen more male leaders over time or why fewer women desire leadership positions, but they do not give us hard rules against ordaining women.

Today, Ryrie's views may appear archaic (or worse) but the real question is whether or not they accurately reflect God's will on this subject. While we may feel that we have made progress in shedding prejudices that colored our understanding of God's Word, society is more degenerate in some ways and that can influence us as well. We must be both charitable and open to correction from the past because someday our views will be history too.

While Ryrie's suggestion that women may be intrinsically more gullible than men may appear naive and sexist by today's standards, it raises the very real question of whether or not men are comfortable with women teaching and leading them. Indeed, it may be just as likely that God has chosen men for leadership more often because women would not be as readily received.

This may help to explain Ryrie's observation that women were absent among the leadership of the early church while God clearly called women as leaders at other times. The social dynamics of all male, all female or mixed gender groups are quite different, and one cannot minister to someone when one is not wanted. In addition to being an argument from silence, Ryrie's observation fails to account for such influential prophetesses as Miriam, Deborah and Huldah (Exod 15:20, Judges 4:4, 2 Kgs 22:14). All the biblical data must be considered on this question.

Ryrie correctly observes that oneness in Christ (Gal 3:28) refers to equality of spiritual status and not necessarily equality of spiritual activity; however, the bonds of Christian unity should result in transformed relationships. While Christianity did not end racial or cultural differences, the racial prejudices of Jews and Greeks began to end through the reconciliation found in Christ Jesus; this set the stage for improvements in civil rights during the twentieth century. While Christianity did not initially support the abolition of slavery, it did not forbid

emancipation (1 Cor 7:21); the bonds of Christian brotherhood ultimately rendered the exploitation of slaves philosophically unacceptable in the nineteenth century. Therefore, while it is true that Paul admonished wives to be submissive to their husbands, he also admonished husbands to love their wives with selfless devotion (Eph 5:22-28). The curse of unconverted male domination and exploitation is transformed through Christ into loving, servant leadership. This brings us to the question of the biblically sanctioned role for women.

While Paul does admonish women to be “keepers at home” (Tit 2:5 AV), this does not necessarily require women to be kept at home. Indeed, elders and deacons were required to be good managers over their households, but this did not preclude their ordination (1 Tim 3:1ff). The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 is portrayed as both commercially successful and managerially competent although it is her husband that sits among the civic leaders (Prv 31:10ff). In addition, it should be noted that Paul’s admonitions were based on the socioeconomic norms of his time; it is doubtful that the first century Greek notion of being domestic (i.e., segregated from society) still applies in a post-industrial, information-age economy. Paul’s comments appear to be his own personal views rather than universal norms (e.g., 1 Cor 7:25) and were motivated by a desire to avoid offending society (1 Tim 5:14).

Ryrie correctly notes the distinction between prophesying and preaching but fails to note the authoritative and didactic nature of the prophetic office. While the scope of a prophet’s ministry varied from individual to individual, it is clearly a significant honor to be selected as a spokesperson for God. It appears likely that Paul considered the prophetic calling to be more significant than that of pastor or teacher (1 Cor 12:28, Eph 4:11); however, the fact that women have served as prophetesses does not either authorize or forbid women from serving as pastors or teachers in the church. The point is that women have, on occasion, served as prophetesses, and as such, they have taught or led other men. What will shortly become clear is that women have never served God in a priestly or ecclesiastical role involving community worship.

With respect to female subordination, the most controversial and least diagnostic passage is Paul’s instructions related to the wearing of veils (1 Cor 11:2-16). For example, some feel that Paul’s use of headship (in verse 3) denotes “source” rather than “authority.”⁴ Although Paul does refer to the origin of woman in the creation (verse 12), it is clear that he does so to build a case for female subordination (verse 10) based on the rule of primogeniture. In addition, Paul’s use of headship in Ephesians 5:22-24 is equally clear as a term synonymous with authority.

Although Paul’s instructions are straightforward, his reasons are less clear. Paul directs men to pray uncovered while women are to be veiled. While this is consistent Greek culture, there is nothing in the Mosaic legislation to support this. Indeed, while the wearing of the tallith or yarmulke may be the product of later Talmudic tradition, one wonders how it could have been accepted if there was such a strong first century objection to it. In addition, the priests were required to wear a linen turban during their ministry (Exod 29:6, 39:28). Similarly, Paul asserts that it is a shame for a man to have long hair, yet a Nazirite was expected to grow his hair long (Num 6:1ff). On the other hand, Paul’s argument is also grounded in the creation order and his instructions were normative for the whole church at that time (1 Cor 11:16).

The best conclusion appears to be that the wearing of veils was a culturally limited application of the universal principle of female submission. Because women of all cultures wore veils during worship, it would have been a convenient symbol of submission. Some suggest that “Paul had before his mind the root-connection between the *Hebrew* terms for ‘veil’ (*radid*), and

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 32-36.

‘subjection’ (*radad*).’⁵ Thus, Paul’s argument employs both culturally limited and universally applicable reasons why women should wear a traditional symbol of feminine modesty. Today, this symbolism is completely lost to a generation raised on a steady diet of Madonna, Lara Croft and Xena the warrior princess. Short hair on women is also no longer considered improper.

Although this interpretation does not preclude female ordination, it may help to explain some of Paul’s later comments restricting women’s involvement in worship services. Rather than seeing Christianity as overturning the Edenic curses and placing women on an equal footing with men, Paul uses a combination of cultural standards and creation order theology (primogeniture) to establish female subordination. While we may easily discard the former, nullifying the latter threatens to undermine the normative nature of Scripture and the doctrine of inspiration. However, it is not necessary to discard the creation order symbolism to allow women to exercise their spiritual gifts and talents in a meaningful way.

Before moving on, it should be noted that there is no proof that the Corinthian women were actually praying or prophesying without veils let alone doing so in congregational assemblies; therefore, Ryrie’s argument concerning women prophesying during congregational assembly is rendered moot. The context rather praises them for their obedience (1 Cor 11:2) and appears to be more hypothetical than actual. This may be in response to previously written questions or objections related to cultural differences among the congregation; Corinth was a Roman colony, and Roman men and women both wore veils during worship. Paul is establishing a normative standard for his day.

Paul’s instructions concerning the order of church services are much more diagnostic regarding women’s role (1 Cor 14:34-37); again, Paul appeals to scriptural precedent and propriety for restricting women from speaking at church. Paul’s appeal to the law (verse 34) is rather vague but one may suppose (on the basis of context) that he is referring to his previous position established in connection with wearing veils; in both cases, he is dealing with the issue of female subordination. There is no reason to suppose that Paul is referring to secular law since priestesses and prophetesses commonly existed among the gentiles (Acts 16:16). If he is referring to the Mosaic legislation in particular, rather than the Genesis creation account in the Torah, he may be alluding to the masculine Aaronic priesthood or the patriarchal authority of the father or husband, which was assumed throughout (e.g., Num 30:1ff). However, this is sheer speculation, and Paul’s creation theology is the most likely explanation. If female subordination is thus established, the impropriety of women speaking in church is not just a culturally based prohibition, and therefore, cannot be lightly dismissed even if a woman is a prophetess. Paul’s further comments indicate that his instructions were no more popular in his day than in ours, but they “are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:36-37).

Paul’s pastoral instructions are equally consistent in restricting women (1 Tim 2:11-15). Paul again resorts to Adam’s primogeniture but (curiously) also to Eve’s role in humanity’s fall. Since Adam and Eve were both culpable, it is not clear why Paul resorts to this line of reasoning unless it is a reference to the resulting subordination of women and pain of childbirth. Because Paul also concludes his remarks with a reference to childbirth, it seems likely that this is what he had in mind. At a minimum, Paul does not see Christianity as a liberation of women from Edenic subordination; for Paul, female subordination is rooted in the priority of Adam’s creation. As a result of this universal principle, for Paul at least, it is inappropriate for a woman to teach or have authority over a man.

⁵ Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, Online Bible v1.01 (Ontario: Timnathserah, 2001) s.v. 1 Cor. 11:10.

Although this still leaves women with many opportunities to exercise spiritual gifts, Paul certainly precluded women from leading congregations as pastors or teachers. While some may object that 1 Timothy 3:1 has been mistranslated as “a man” instead of the more gender neutral “any one,” it is inconceivable that Paul had anything other than an all male episcopate in mind.⁶ Similarly, there is nothing to suggest that the term *prostasis* implied authority or that Phoebe was anything other than a helper of Paul’s ministry (Rom 16:1-2). Finally, there is nothing gender neutral about the fact that an overseer or a deacon was to be the husband of one wife.

The case for ordaining deaconesses is less clear. Because *diakonos* is used as a generic description of one who serves as well as the title of an office, it is not clear if Phoebe was only the former or also the latter. Ryrie’s objection that Paul did not use the feminine *diakonissa* is moot since the term did not exist at this time; however, Pliny (ca AD 111) is believed to have referred to deaconesses (*ministrae*) in a letter to Trajan (*Epistola*, 10:96).⁷ Similarly, the context of 1 Timothy 3:11 is not clear; Paul may be speaking of deacon’s wives since he expects deacons to govern their households well and elders to keep their children in subjection. Lastly, Paul’s reference to widows being placed on the list to receive church support is hardly evidence that they were being ordained to an office to give support (cf. 1 Tim 5:9, Act 6:1ff). Therefore, we have no clear, biblical indication that women were ordained as deaconesses; certainly, there is no evidence here that women may be ordained as pastors or teachers over men.

Paul’s position raises many difficult questions. While it is clear that Paul sees female subordination as a universal principle, are all of his applications equally binding on the church for all time? How can Paul’s restrictions be reconciled with examples of prophetesses teaching and leading men at other times? If we reject Paul’s reasons for female subordination as culturally limited or theologically invalid, can we still hold that Scripture is inspired and normative? Can we voluntarily end female subordination as we did with slavery?

While we recognize that women are sentient, free moral agents just like men, it is a dangerous thing to lightly dismiss apostolic teaching. It would be cruel and tragic to frustrate and waste the spiritual gifts that women have to offer if we insist on female subordination without proper scriptural justification. On the other hand, if we admit women to positions not authorized to them we risk breaking “the Lord’s commandment,” and it “is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). It is also important to note that we are only considering restricting women as far as teaching or having authority over men; even Paul was amenable to women teaching other women (Tit 2:3-5).

An examination of the ministry of several acknowledged prophetesses is instructive. Although Miriam is mentioned prominently with Moses and Aaron (Micah 6:4), she leads only the women in worship (Exod 15:20); her brothers always have control of congregational ritual and worship. Although Deborah won the respect of Barak and the children of Israel, her subordination is affirmed in that she is called “the wife of Lapidoth” (Judg 4:4ff); clearly, the concept of mutual submission is advanced here (1 Cor 7:4, Eph 5:21). Deborah calls Barak to lead the army to victory and only consents to lead when asked. Similarly, Huldah acts as God’s spokeswoman but is also called “the wife of Shallum” (2 Chr 34:22ff). Finally, Anna announces the coming of the Messiah to those she meets in the temple precincts (Luke 2:36ff); it must be confessed, however, that this is not a case of a woman speaking in church (i.e., in assembly) or leading congregational worship. It is clear, however, that women can share the gospel with those

⁶ Robert K. Johnston, *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 251.

⁷ V. M. Sinton, “Deaconess” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed.

who are receptive, and this is consistent with the example of Aquila and Priscilla sharing the gospel with Apollos (Acts 18:26).

Clearly, female subordination is not a hindrance to leadership or service when a woman possesses God's favor and the appropriate fruits for the role. However, Paul was also a prophet and understood better than we do the distinction between prophets, pastors and teachers. In all of the previous examples, men were willing to receive their service and had a much less restrictive approach to female subordination. Male expectations about female subordination are the key to understanding the various applications found in Scripture.

Although Paul clearly supports female subordination as a universal principle, a careful examination of his applications is also instructive. If Paul's application is inconsistent with prior revelation and example (principally in the Old Testament), it is evidence of a culturally limited application that is a concession to the more restrictive definition of female subordination found in Greek culture.

First, Paul's comments about veils and hair length appear to be a culturally limited application because they are consistent with Greek culture but are at odds with Old Testament examples. In cultures that still use the veil as a symbol of submission or modesty, Christian women should still comply.

Second, although Paul's restriction on women speaking in church is partly a concession to Greek cultural expectations concerning submissiveness, his instructions are also consistent with Old Testament practice and are called the Lord's commandments. It should not be surprising that God's will on this issue is the same for the old and new covenants; female ordination and female subordination are intrinsically inconsistent. One cannot preserve the symbolism of Adamic primogeniture and also ordain women as congregational pastors or teachers; although God is willing to allow women broad latitude in their service, it is evident that He draws the line on female ordination. Ryrie correctly observes that "women should not lead in any way in public worship."⁸ However, a woman could ask a question during an interactive Bible study; it is a classroom setting, rather than a worship service, and would not be perceived as "shameful" or insubordinate in today's cultural setting.

Third, while Paul's rule against women teaching or having authority over men is also a concession to Greek expectations of female subordination, the application appears to be culturally limited because it is inconsistent with Old Testament examples. Paul draws attention to this fact by saying, "I do not permit" (1 Tim 2:11), while it is evident that at other times God and the men of Israel did. Outside of congregational worship and instruction, women can exercise their spiritual gifts and still maintain the symbolism of female subordination in their worship and marriage; for example, this would include writing books or teaching in lectures where men are free to participate voluntarily. The administration of Bible schools and colleges, charity efforts or missionary activities, with other male regents or committeemen as peers, would be acceptable to many. As a pragmatic issue, women should be sensitive concerning this issue and avoid the appearance of forcing their service upon men; they should win their respect and assent through constructive dialogue and interaction.

Consequently, it appears that women may be ordained as deaconesses but not as pastors. The term *diakonos* refers to service, rather than leading or presiding, and it appears that deaconesses were ordained in the early second century. However, based on Paul's comments, it appears very unlikely that God intended to ordain women as congregational pastors. Rejecting Paul's instruction carries with it the risk of being rejected by God (1 Cor 14:38, 2 Tim 3:5).

⁸ Ryrie, *You Mean the Bible Says That?*, 42.

Unlike the issue of slavery, where emancipation was not only permitted but was divinely guaranteed (Dt 15:12), restrictions on female ordination appear binding based on God's will; they are not to speak in church.

However, Paul says that women should subject themselves (1 Cor 14:34 NASB); it is never appropriate for Christian men to try to forcibly impose subordination. The doctrine of female subordination should never be used as a justification for domestic violence or the exploitation and denigration of women; the spirit of Jesus Christ has nothing in common with despotism or sexism. Furthermore, men need to understand that they have a greater responsibility and accountability before God to provide the godly and loving leadership without any compromise with the truth of God's word (Luke 12:48, Jas 3:1).

Conclusion

Since the beginning of time, society has been dominated by men. In recent times, the concept of female subordination has been challenged as women have asserted and achieved substantial freedom and independence from traditional roles. As a result, many have undertaken the task of re-examining the biblical foundations of female subordination.

After considering the position of Charles Ryrie, several important points have been determined. First, the concept of female subordination is affirmed as biblical and normative for the church at all times; it is rooted in the Pauline teaching of Adamic primogeniture and not in the Edenic curses following the fall of humanity into sin. Second, the practical application of this principle has varied considerably across time and cultures; while the early church accommodated some of the more restrictive implementations of this concept, God is not intrinsically supportive of those implementations. Third, while God has allowed women great latitude in their service, it is evident that He draws the line on female ordination; women should not lead congregational worship.

In conclusion, men and women need to seek God's will and strive to live a life that is pleasing to their Creator and congruent with His instructions. The Christian calling is one of loving service that opposes all forms of self-exaltation and exploitation; it is incompatible with sexist attitudes and behavior. Christian men have a responsibility to insure that women have every opportunity to achieve their full potential without compromising the truth because of pressure from a world that largely ignores God's will.

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