



Women in Ministry

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The various roles of ministry for women have been heatedly debated for centuries, and continue today. Therefore, I would like to establish at the outset that much of the confusion surrounding this subject is due to a lack of accurate exegesis and not taking into account what was proper at a certain time or in a certain culture. In other words, some men (and some denominations) endeavor to keep women in their “proper place” by quoting (out of context) the “Word of God” to them. And in most instances, they are absolutely wrong! Hermeneutical principles used for scriptural interpretation are essential tools to help us learn truth about such matters. But we must attempt to use the correct method and endeavor to understand what the Scripture is *really* saying to us -- both in ancient times and today.

It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into *all* the cultural backgrounds and mannerisms of each book of the Bible and exegete them. This is a matter that I will address at a later time in future articles. However, I will examine some of the stumbling blocks to properly understanding the role of women in ministry.

STUMBLING BLOCKS TO PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Theological Bias. Because we come from different denominational backgrounds (many of which denied women *any* role in ministry), it may be difficult for some to accept a woman in the pulpit. In fact, many denominations outright sneer at a woman who is called “pastor.” Although such church organizations do not ordain women, they will, nonetheless, allow women a limited role in ministerial activities; i.e. teaching a Sunday School class, or instructing teenagers or children. In order to rid ourselves of such *theological bias* it behooves us to know, beyond doubt, what the Bible says about women in ministry -- not what we (or our particular denomination) may *think* it says.

Cultural Illiteracy. In most cases, those who prohibit women from certain ministerial roles do not consider the cultural context behind biblical commands. The occidental (western) mind cannot conceive of life being different from its own. Thus, every Scripture is interpreted from the American cultural viewpoint. One such example (and the most often misunderstood passage of Scripture by those who oppose women in ministry) is Paul’s command: “*let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.*” (I Corinthians 14:34 KJV - quotation marks and italics are mine). It is important for us to understand that this quote follows Paul’s discussion on spiritual gifts and disorder in the Corinthian church. Therefore, if “keeping women silent in the churches” was so important, why does Paul only mention it here, and only once? Keep in mind that Paul had more trouble with women in the Corinthian church than in any other. An investigation into the background of I Corinthians 14:34 explains why this was the case. The pagan temples of Corinth contained thousands of women who were priestesses, some of whom had become Christians. The habit of these new converts was to disrupt church services by yelling, loud talking, and parading themselves in lavish attire. Because they were not entering the synagogue with the right purpose, they had to be taught the ways of God and instructed in proper behavior. To further illustrate the confusion, Paul “rebuked” those Corinthians who, arriving early to partake of the Lord’s Communion Table, were eating all the bread, drinking all the wine, and getting drunk (I Cor. 11:17-33)! Is this not a *disorderly* church? The Apostle repeatedly refers to the disorder in the church in I Corinthians, chapter eleven. When speaking to the Corinthians, he says, “*I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.*” (NIV-11:17; quotations and italics are mine) He further directs the Corinthians to eat and drink at home, and to show reverence for the Lord’s Table. Notice the last verse in I Corinthians 14:40 which reads, “*Let all things be done decently and in order.*” (KJV- quotation marks and italics are mine). It is clear from the disorder and confusion created by

the men and women of Corinth that Paul is struggling with maintaining order in the church. While I Corinthians 14:34 is the verse most widely quoted by certain religious groups to keep women silent in the church, there are others. However, due to space constraints, all of these cannot be mentioned. For those who love the Word of God and want to understand, beyond doubt, what the scripture *really* says, remember that the customs and manners of *any* period must *always* be taken into account before an interpretation is deemed to be accurate. And when a passage of Scripture is quoted “out of context” it then becomes “a pretext.”

Personal Interpretation Based on Gender. Many faithful women followed Jesus and contributed to His earthly ministry. In fact, these women (mentioned in the four Gospels) are the “unsung heroes” of the faith – unnamed disciples given little notice or recognition. While there are differences in men and women from a physical standpoint, women are viewed as equal in the Kingdom of God (I Cor. 11: 7-9). For example, many so called “holiness churches” have established strict rules for women, but few for men. In most cases, women’s hair and clothing are the two areas regulated by the ruling men and by-laws of such churches. The most quoted verse is “*Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.*” (NIV-I Peter 3:3; quotations and italics are mine). It seems, however, that men in such churches commonly exercise their masculine privilege of wearing gold adornment, as well as the style of clothing currently in vogue. During the time of Christ, the long hair of women was greatly admired in both Palestine and the pagan cultures. Women of pagan (Gentile) nations adorned their hair and bodies beyond belief, while the humble Hebrew women wore long hair with only nose rings and anklets for jewelry. The custom of “plaiting the hair” began with the Egyptians. Later, women of other Gentile nations -- such as the Romans and Syrians -- focused even more on the adorning and plaiting of their hair than did the Egyptians. No doubt the Apostle Peter is referring to this arrogant and prideful heathen practice in his writings. Gentile women spent several hours each day adorning their hair, but were ungodly in their lifestyles. In like manner, an Egyptian woman boasted hundreds of plaits in her hair, weaving into it small hand made figures of coronets, harps, wreaths, diadems, emblems of temples of worship, and images of cities conquered by her husband. Competing with each other, the hairstyles of these women often reached a height of two or three feet. Images of women from this period bear many of these symbols. Likewise, statues of Roman women, including one of an Empress discovered in Silica in AD1845, clearly prove this point.

Authority over Women: Your Right & Duty Because You’re a Man. Everyone must submit to someone, but many Christians feel they have the right and authority to “rebuke and chastise” anyone at their whim. But are they in the will of God by being so quick to chastise others? Although Jesus was Lord and Co-creator of the universe, He did not fail to submit Himself to the authority of Rome, paying taxes (Matthew 17:24-27) as demanded by Caesar. The Apostle Peter also mentions that believers should submit to civil authorities in some things. While it is true that a father in America has the authority to discipline his children, he also is bound by the laws of the United States and the civil courts of his state that prohibit him from abusing his children. *In other words, “authority” is a double-edged sword.* If a man is “under authority” to control and “rebuke” women, who is his authority? Is he truly following scripture? Or is he trying to overcome his hatred of women? Or does he have a need to dominate women for some unknown reason? In thirty-seven years of ministry and professional counseling, I have learned that men who feel “led” to “rebuke” women were usually abused and hurt by women authority figures when they were children or teenagers. (NOTE: Some of these remarks were gleaned from the book “*Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women*” by George and Dora Winston, published by Xulon Press, USA. Residents of Holland, the Winstons received their theological education at highly acclaimed universities and seminaries in the United States. In my opinion, this book is an excellent example of biblical exegesis on this topic).

The Misconception of the Role of Women in the Early Church. The church today is an institution. However, it is slowly returning to the cell-group paradigm of the early church which was so effective it evangelized the known world in three hundred years. While it is true that the Apostle Paul was highly educated, a former Pharisee and Doctor of the Law, the early church was comprised of small groups of unlearned and ordinary people passionate in telling the world about Jesus. This passion is lacking in churches today, so “gimmicks” are often used to attract people to the Kingdom of God. Be assured that I am not against

church growth programs. I personally believe much can be learned from such programs since most churches are sitting on the “idle switch” instead of employing “high gear.” Without doubt, most church growth programs today usually incorporate the “cell group” paradigm into any growth pattern in which women are heavily involved. After all, this model of church development has been right there in the Bible all the time. Yet, we haven’t realized how effective it is. Today South Korea boasts the largest number of Christians in the world per capita – 48% claim to be born again Christians. Arguably the pastor most noted in our time for recognizing women as valuable assets in church growth is South Korean Pastor, Rev. Dr. Paul Yongi Cho of the *Yoidi Full Gospel Church*. In the early days of his ministry, Pastor Cho experienced many disappointments and set backs, but refused to give up. After much prayer and reflection, he felt inclined to use women for teaching or preaching, since women were kept “under control” in the churches of South Korea. Once Pastor Cho had experienced both a heart and head change concerning women in ministry, his church skyrocketed to a congregation of 600,000 members, with a physical structure beyond compare. Probably more than any other man of God, Pastor Yongi Cho has utilized the cell-group model to build the largest church on the planet. Why does it work? Because people form lasting relationships and more willingly share intimate thoughts and fears in small group settings. Every church in America today that has experienced exponential growth has used the home or cell-group model in one fashion or another. *By involving both women and men, it is – best of all – biblical!*