



WHAT IS THE TEACHING
ROLE OF WOMEN?

by Dr. Glenn Parkinson

In order to focus attention on the issue of the teaching ministry of women in the Church, much of the Scripture's clear teaching about men and women will be assumed. Specifically, we will assume that men and women share equally in the image of God, the cultural mandate, the redemption provided by Christ and the reception of spiritual gifts. Our focus, then, can be limited to several key passages and ideas which deal with a woman's ministry of teaching.

THE GENERAL USE OF THE SCRIPTURES

As we begin to consider the ministry of teaching, it is important to remember the basis of all teaching in the Church. Ultimately, the Church is taught neither by local men nor women, but by God Himself through Jesus Christ.¹ His teaching is administered by the Holy Spirit,² who has provided the Bible as our formal authority in all matters of faith and practice.³

All believers have the God-given responsibility to study the Bible to the limits of their ability and opportunity.⁴ Furthermore, every Christian has the responsibility not only to study the Bible, but also to teach it to brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

(Colossians 3:16)

There is nothing in this verse or its context suggesting that any of the activities mentioned are restricted to men. It seems clear that there is a general teaching of the Word of God which is open to all Christians, men and women alike. While the Bible explicitly exhorts woman to teach other women⁵ and praises them for teaching children,⁶ we see that women are also expected to teach and admonish anyone in the Church with the wisdom of God's Word.

This general sharing of God's Word is sometimes referred to as "prophecy" in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, prophecy had more of the

1 Matthew 23:8-12.

2 John 14:25-27; 15:26; 16:12-15.

3 2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:16.

4 Psalm 119:11; 1 Timothy 3:14-17 (cf. 1:5).

5 Titus 2:3-5.

6 2 Timothy 1:5.

connotation of immediate revelation. However, with the fullness of Christ and His apostles, such immediate revelation is no longer necessary.⁷ In the context of sharing within a local congregation, the Apostle Paul could define prophecy more generally:

Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. (1 Corinthians 14:3)

Here, there is no assumption of immediate revelation. The Holy Spirit is indeed involved in such prophecy,⁸ but in the role of helping us understand and apply the revealed Word which we already have.⁹

Are women encouraged or allowed to “prophesy” in this way? Paul assumes so in 1 Corinthians.

Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head — it is just as though her head were shaved. (1 Corinthians 11:5)

The issue addressed by Paul deals with the cultural expression of male headship. But the point at hand for us is simply that Paul does not forbid a woman prophesying in Church. By teaching *how* she is supposed to do it, he clearly implies that the practice is accepted.

Therefore, when Paul describes proper Church function a few chapters later in the same book, he must be assuming the participation of women.

When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. (1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-31)

We will come back to this text. But overall it appears to parallel Paul’s exhortation in Colossians that *all* Christians should share their insights into God’s revealed Word for the common benefit. This kind of teaching is open to men and women alike.

7 Hebrews 1:1-3.

8 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

9 Ephesians 1:17 f.

BIBLICAL RULE IN THE CHURCH

While every Christian is called to use the Bible as the basis for strengthening, encouraging and comforting others in the Church, God has specifically set apart (ordained) elders in each congregation to arbitrate which interpretations of Scripture accurately reflect its meaning.

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you

[An elder] *must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.* (Titus 1:5,9)

The office of elder is one of government, or rule. Note, however, that the elders' task is not to rule the Church by their own authority, but to administer *Christ's* authority by soundly interpreting and applying His revealed Word.¹⁰ In this way, elders are said to “shepherd” God’s flock, and the title of “shepherd” (pastor) applies especially to those elders who are particularly called to build up the Church through biblical teaching.¹¹

As the Church at large shares insights into the Scriptures, the elders and pastors are responsible to weigh and judge what is said, affirming what is true and correcting what is false with the written Word of God.¹²

This is a special form of “teaching.” It is not merely conveying biblical content and suggesting application, but authoritatively ruling on proper biblical interpretation. This role is one of heavy responsibility and not to be entered into lightly.¹³ For this reason, it may not be independently assumed; it is a role which must be conferred by the Church’s recognized leaders.¹⁴

Both the Old and New Testaments assume that elders are men. We will come back to this point later.

10 cf. Mark 10:42-45.

11 1 Timothy 5:17; Ephesians 4:11-12.

12 cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

13 James 3:1.

14 1 Timothy 4:11-14.

WHAT ARE WOMEN PROHIBITED FROM DOING?

Let's go back to a passage already cited to expand and highlight its context:

When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of God. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

(1 Corinthians 14:26, 27-35)

Note that as Paul encourages everyone to be involved in sharing biblical insights, he sternly warns that each contribution must be “weighed carefully” by “others.” If this text were the only one we had to go on, we might think that the Church is to be guided by some kind of democratic consensus of the entire congregation. We have seen from other texts, however, that biblical interpretation is to be governed by elders. Therefore, while Paul merely refers to “other prophets” in the above passage, we may assume that he is making special reference to the Corinthian elders.

This observation puts the following comments about women in an entirely different light and removes an otherwise inexplicable contradiction with Chapter 11 of the same book. When Paul commands women not to speak in Church, he is not forbidding them to share biblical insights along with the men (something he has already tacitly assumed and approved). Rather, he is forbidding them to take part in the process of passing authoritative judgment upon what is being shared. That is a task for elders. As stated previously, biblical authors always assume that elders are men. Therefore, what is forbidden to women here is not the common ministry of teaching which every Christian shares, but the specific role of teaching that governs the proper interpretation of Scripture.

CHURCH AUTHORITY AND THE SEXES

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing — if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

(1 Timothy 2:11-15)

In this text, Paul specifically forbids a woman to teach a man. But which kind of “teaching” is in view? Is a woman forbidden to share her insights into the Bible’s meaning and application when men are present? No, we have already seen that this cannot be so. Is a woman forbidden to authoritatively rule as what is sound doctrine and what is not? Yes, we have already seen that Paul made this very point elsewhere. In fact, we can see that he explicitly makes the same point here if we understand the phrase “or to have authority” not as the second element in a list, but as a phrase explaining what he means in this context by “teach.” His thought might then be paraphrased, “I do not permit a woman to teach a man — that is to say, authoritatively tell a man how to interpret the Bible.” Exercising such authority would be inappropriate because it is the work of an elder.¹⁵

There remains, however, the question of why only men can be elders. Are we dealing here merely with cultural custom (which may change) or with a timeless biblical principle?

This is precisely the issue Paul takes up next in the passage last quoted above. The reference to childbearing at the end has been notoriously difficult to pin down with certainty,¹⁶ but the overall meaning of the text is quite clear.

Paul goes back to Genesis 1-3 to support his statement about women. This is very important for two reasons. One is that the conclusion Paul draws is rooted in the pre-Fall world, before sin. Therefore, the overcoming of sin in Christ’s Church will not change it. The other reason this is so important is that Paul bases his statements not in culture but in an interpretation of the Bible. *Any apostolic interpretation of biblical truth must be normative for*

¹⁵ It might well be said that a non-ordained man also has no right to rule on biblical interpretation. 1 Timothy 2:9-10, however, begins a section specifically dealing with women.

¹⁶ Options include: women will come through the curse (represented by painful childbearing, see Genesis 3:16) through faith, or: women, too, will be saved through the birth of the child (referring to Christ, see Genesis 3:15).

Christ's Church. If Paul was culturally bound in one interpretation of the Old Testament, he might be culturally bound in any of his interpretations, destroying the credibility of all his teaching regarding the gospel.

What does Paul draw from Genesis 1-3? “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” This fundamental fact of the creation order is the key to understanding any aspect of male headship, including the office of elder.

Modern man has rejected the Genesis account as mythology. While much of the Church still affirms its historic validity, our modern secular mindset has considerably reduced our appreciation of the profound fact of creation — that God *made* us. Christianity is centered in the cross of Christ and God’s great redemptive plan. But there is no meaning in that plan apart from the facts of creation. It is because God made us that we are responsible to Him, that sin has meaning and that the cross is good news.¹⁷

So fundamentally significant is the fact of God’s creative work that He saw fit to order our week of work and worship in a way that perpetually reminds us of His creation order. The seven day Sabbath cycle is a ceremonial commemoration of the order of creation. It is a ceremonial observance which God actually commands, giving it moral authority.

The Sabbath is not the only ceremonial memory of our creation, however. God chose another way to commemorate for all time the fact that we did not spring up spontaneously from primordial ooze. Humanity was a specific creation of God, beginning with a *single* act of special creation: Adam.¹⁸

The special creation of humanity means that mankind originally existed not as a species or even a couple, but as one individual. The Bible considers this a profound fact. It is the foundation of representative headship with respect to God’s covenants with mankind – that many are represented by one. There was a time when *all* humanity was represented by *one* individual. The relationship of all who would come from him, including Eve, depended on Adam’s own personal righteousness.¹⁹ This arrangement subsequently forms the pattern and basis for God’s plan of redemption, as He would send a “second Adam”

17 cf. Acts 17:22-34, the only full sermon outline in the Bible of an evangelistic message to Gentiles. Without the Old Testament as a common background, Paul spends the bulk of his evangelistic sermon talking about the implications of creation.

18 Genesis 2:4-9. God’s intent was to create both male and female human beings, of course. God gives no reason for beginning with a male — indeed, the choice may have been arbitrary. Perhaps the idea of a woman coming from a man better suited His purpose of showing that creation was a divine miracle, cf. 1 Corinthians 11:8-9.

19 Genesis 2:15-17. It is very significant that this covenant is made just before Eve is created. Adam is the single representative head of mankind.

to individually represent all of a new humanity through His accomplished righteousness.²⁰

This order of creation is *ceremonially* commemorated for all time through male headship in social structures. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” The specific order of creation, Adam first and then Eve from Adam, gives a special ceremonial dignity to males. This ceremonial dignity is not derived from some inherent male superiority, any more than the Sabbath is inherently a “better” day of the week. Rather, like the Sabbath, male headship memorializes and honors our Creator’s work and confesses the human responsibility to obey God.²¹

Like the Sabbath, this ceremonial dignity has moral overtones because it is affirmed by God’s commands. The husband is commanded to function as the head of the home.²² Qualified men are to lead the church as elders.²³ It is perhaps fair to say that it is generally more fitting for males to take the lead in our common submission to Christ’s Lordship.

It is important to understand that this headship is ceremonial in nature. It does not imply any kind of male superiority. It does not mean that men rule by their own authority. It certainly does not mean that men have the God-given authority to impose their will on women. Christ alone is Lord; male headship means that males have the ceremonial privilege of leading in *obedience* to Him. They have the first right to make personal sacrifices in the pursuit of God’s will. Whenever any man opposes Christ’s will, his “authority” in that matter evaporates. It is simply more fitting for men (the “firstborn,” as it were, in Adam) to take the lead in submitting social structures to *God’s* revealed will. Doing so is meant to call to mind God’s work of creation and the covenant made with Adam — and the one later made with the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

Of course, what is ceremonially proper may be suspended at need. The normal priorities of the Jewish Sabbath or sacrificial rituals could be superseded in order to honor their underlying intent.²⁴ Perhaps this is why God Himself

20 Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:42-49.

21 Like the Sabbath, might this arrangement also provide some social benefits? Paul goes on in 1 Timothy to remark how Adam was not deceived, but Eve was. Some have suggested that men are somewhat better suited than women for theological reasoning or some other leadership functions. The author is not yet convinced that this is Paul’s meaning, and is still seeking to understand Paul’s intent here.

22 Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Peter 3:1-6.

23 1 Timothy 3:1-7 obviously refers to men; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

24 Matthew 12:1-14.

occasionally saw fit to raise up female leadership among His people.²⁵ Such was the exception rather than the rule, however.

APPLICATION

What all this means is that the issue which must be addressed first is not the teaching ministry of women, but the way the Church's elders exercise their unique teaching authority. It is their role which is restricted to men — and only to duly ordained men, at that.²⁶

How do the elders supervise the Church's teaching ministry? The preaching ministry of the pulpit is so solidly associated with Church authority that, normally, only elders preach and only pastors should preach regularly. But how is the Sunday School curriculum reviewed? How are adult Bible classes and home studies supervised?

This does not negate the specific teaching gifts of women, but raises the issue of how the church's elders meaningfully supervise all the Church's teaching, assuring that proper doctrine is taught. It also raises the issue of how male headship is appropriately manifested in each setting.

The other set of issues has to do with contemporary cultural forms and expectations. In Paul's day, a woman's head covering expressed ceremonial male headship.²⁷

What can symbolize headship today? On the one hand, our current society exercises a determined effort to eliminate all cultural expressions of male headship, confusing the idea with male superiority and utterly rejecting its biblical basis. On the other hand, past societies confused biblical headship (which emphasizes Christ's authority) with a secular patriarchal system that emphasized male authority. What can we do to commemorate that "Adam was formed first, then Eve," recalling the initial covenant that bound us in blessed obedience to our Creator — lost in sin but restored in Christ?

²⁵ Deborah (Judges 4-5); Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) and perhaps Priscilla (Acts 18:18-26).

²⁶ It is an important but often overlooked point that whatever duties of elders are prohibited to women are also prohibited to men who are not elders. On analogy, a wife may not usurp the headship of her husband — but then, neither can her husband's male friend at work. Not all men are called to lead a given home, but only that particular man who is the husband. Similarly, not all men are called to lead a given congregation, but only those particular men who have been ordained to the task.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

The teaching ministry of women in the church requires a clear understanding both of biblical authority and biblical headship. Applications are difficult to determine, but Christ will bless His Church as we do our best to honor His design.



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