

Equality in Ministry

A Personal Journey

By: Elder Bob Boggess

I want to share a story. It is the story about my own journey of faith across a region of church life which is probably the single most controversial subject in today's religious exercises. I did not make this journey alone, for all of us have made, or will make, this faith journey--although perhaps along different pathways. I am not the first to make this journey. I am thankful for that, because the pioneers on this journey left some clear marks along the way which should make it easier for us who follow. Nor will I be the last, for today this is a divisive issue that demands an answer, one that is threatening to divert the energies of many from the mission Christ gave to His church and perhaps threatens the order and unity of the church as seriously as any issue in this century. I am referring to the matter of calling women into the ministry of the church as fully authorized pastors to the flock of God.

This outline will not specifically address the ordination of women. That, too, is a very volatile subject. However, the questions about ordination should find a logical conclusion as we discover a sound Biblical/theological answer to the concern about the appropriateness of women in pastoral ministry. What follows is an outline of my personal faith journey in search for an answer to that question. It is not intended to be an exclusive study of the subject. These are just a few waymarks along the way which I hope will be helpful as you make your journey.

I consider myself an average Adventist and middle-class American. I accepted Christ as my personal Lord at an early age and have followed Him diligently through the years. I deeply trust His love and grace and love Him dearly as my Friend. Like most Americans whose lives span World War II and the last half of this century, I am accustomed to a church life in which the pastor and principal church leaders have been men. Women, when they served, were usually appointed to supportive roles. The inconsistencies of this arrangement were not apparent in those days. I speak of inconsistencies with the Biblical principles held by both those who now support women in ministry and, paradoxically, as well as inconsistencies with the principles of those who oppose women in ministry.

My first confrontation with the issues connected to women in ministry was as a young pastor just arriving in a new parish district

of churches in Iowa. One of these four congregations had a woman elder. I had known of women serving as elders before, but never in my own church. But this was now my church, and I could no longer ignore the matter. Several times since, and in over 35 years of ministerial leadership as a pastor and later as a conference president, I have had opportunity to face this issue and therefore my spiritual moral integrity demanded that I make this journey. I hope the story of my journey will help you with your journey, for I believe that spiritual and moral integrity requires that you, too, must make this journey.

Like more Christians I have long been familiar with the three Bible texts regarding women in church ministry which are the most well known. There are many others, of course, but these three have, for years, settled the issue for many Christians.

- I Corinthians 14:34 - Let your women keep silence in church.
- I Timothy 2:12- I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man, but to be in silence.
- I Timothy 3:2 - A bishop (elder) must be blameless, the husband of one wife (also Titus 1:7).

Now, the Bible is a consistent book. If God is the author, using human agents of course, *the message should be consistent with the practices*. But, the more I considered the issues, the more I discovered apparent inconsistencies, both between the Bible message and modern practices, and between what people say the Bible means and what the actual Bible people did. For example:

1. Women today, do not keep silent in church. They teach, they pray, they plan, they direct programs, sometimes even with men in subordinate positions.
2. In the Bible days, women did not always keep silent. Some were prophets. Paul commends women in ministry.
3. Single men, as well as divorced and remarried men, are frequently asked to be elders.
4. Some men are asked to be elders who do not have children and, not infrequently, men with unruly children are asked to serve.
5. Ellen White, appointed by God as a prophet, leader, and highly regarded author, did not keep silent, nor was she reluctant to exercise authority over a man.
6. The Bible clearly teaches that women will have significant roles in latter day religious leadership.

Obviously, a deeper study and clearer understanding must be pursued. Here is an outline of some of the major issues and Bible

references related to and often used in discussing this theme.

I. Concerning the subordination issue at the time of Creation (Genesis 1 and 2).

- A. Genesis 1 clearly supports equality between men and women. "Male and female He created them" v.29. No subordination of woman to man is implied here.
- B. Some Hebrew scholars point out that the movement of the Hebrew thought in Genesis 1 and 2 is from incompleteness to completeness (not from dominance to subordination as some have held). No subordination of woman to man is implied here.
- C. The word "helper" or "help," thought to signify subordination, is used elsewhere in the Bible in reference to God's relationship with people (i.e. Psalm 33:20; "He is our helper," and also Psalm 70:5 and 115:9-11, etc.) Surely this word does not signify that God is subordinate to human beings. No subordination of woman to man is implied here.
- D. Hebrew scholars suggest that, in the Bible, whenever a superior names an inferior, there is always a special word formula used. In the case of Adam "calling" Eve "woman" in Genesis 2:23, the formula is not used. Adam did not name woman. Apparently God did. In any case, Moses had already called her woman in the previous verse (v.22). No subordination of woman to man is implied here.
- E. Conclusion: Creation supports equality, not female subordination to male dominance.

II. Concerning the apparent masculine leadership ("head") roles in the New Testament - i.e., Ephesians 5:23, "For the husband is the head of the wife.":

- A. Only in the home and marriage relationship does the Bible indicate any authority of man over woman, and even here it is not a subservient relationship but rather a sacrificial relationships in which the husband loves his wife and is willing to die for her well-being if necessary (v.25). Some scholars suggest that "submit" in verse 22 is a military term used to describe the submission of military officers to the high command, as they all follow a previously mutually agreed upon field strategy. It is "role" not "authority" that is referred to here. Each person has full or equal authority in their own respective roles. God in His wisdom has established an orderly process for the management of our homes.

7. Concerning I Timothy 2:11-12: "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man":
 - a. The word for "woman" used here appears in four other parallel passages (Ephesians 5:23, I Corinthians 14:34, Colossians 3:18, and I Peter 3:1).
 - b. All five are calls for submission.
 - c. The word translated in these texts, "woman," can also mean "wife," and is so translated in *three* of the other texts.
 - d. In all four of these parallel passages, no one questions that the word clearly means "wife" and is contextually drawn out of the marriage/home relationship, not universal male and female relationships.
 - e. Since the word is the same and the context is the same in the four parallel passages as in I Timothy (note "childbearing" in 2:15), proper hermeneutics would suggest that all five of these verses are talking about husband/wife relationships and are not therefore applicable to universal relationships between men and women.

8. Nowhere in scripture is the role relationship between men and women in marriage cast as normative for the role relationship of men and women in the church.

- B. Several women in the Bible served in roles which were equal to or dominant over men.
 1. Deborah (Judges 4) had an acknowledged authority over men, even leading men into warfare.
 2. Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21, Micah 6:3-4) was an acknowledged prophet of God with equal recognition as Moses and Aaron.
 3. Hulda (2 Kings 22:13-14) was a prophet with authority over the king, priests and scribes.

- C. Concerning the masculine terms used to describe the work of the "elder" in I Timothy 3:1-7 (also Titus 1:6-9):
 1. The ten commandments are addressed in masculine language, but are accepted as referring to both male and female.

2. Contextually and culturally, the expression "husband of one wife" (v.2) probably means "not polygamous" rather than "married."

D. Concerning "women keep silent" in I Corinthians 14:34:

1. The context makes clear that the problem of confusion in assemblies was the issue (v.33): confusion involving tongues (v.9), confusion involving prophesying (vs 29-30), confusion involving women speaking out (v.34). All were apparently causing some confusion that could bring disrepute upon the church. All are directed to keep silent in order to avoid confusion in the church.
2. Does this mean women were never to talk in church? No more than those with tongues or prophesying. In fact, Paul has previously addressed men and women equally with instruction about how to go about prophesying in church (11:4-5). Obviously there were times when women were to speak (minister) in church. Bible stories provided frequent examples of women ministering in church.
3. Whatever meaning one draws from the text, clearly it is not a prohibition of women's (or prophets, or those with tongues) ministering to the gathered saints.

III. Concerning the leadership role of women in the Bible:

- A. As noted above regarding Deborah and others, women in the Bible often gave service in the leadership of the people of God.
- B. Paul, in fact, commends the spiritual leadership of several women who served the church with him.
 6. Romans 16:1-2 - Phoebe is called a "servant" - the correct meaning of the original word is "deacon" - and gives her authority to ask for assistance in her work (she was apparently a deacon).
 7. Philippians 4:3 - women are spoken of as "labored with men in the gospel" and "fellow laborers" with Paul in his ministry.
 3. Priscilla (a woman) along with Aquila "expounded" (taught) to Apollos (a man) the "way of God more perfectly."
- C. Acts 2:17-18 declares that both males and females will be agents of God's ministry in the last days.

IV. One of the clearest texts in Scripture regarding women's equality with men to minister in the church is Galatians 3:28.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ."

- A. Some hold that this verse is not addressing the subject of women in ministry. However, none will deny that this verse stands clearly in condemnation of any ethnic and cultural superiority in society as well as the spiritual equality in which we all stand before God.
- B. The words used in the Greek text are rare and precise words which can mean only "male and female" and can never mean "husband and wife" (thus preserving Paul's understanding of the husband/wife relationships).
- C. Surely gender must be included here in Paul's denunciation of discrimination.
- D. Some have asked why Jesus did not call a woman as one of the twelve apostles. Perhaps for the same reason that he did not call a Gentile or a slave. The gospel needed to be presented by those whose witness would be taken seriously at that time and place - Jewish men. No one, however, takes this to mean that only Jewish men could ever minister the gospel to the church.
- E. The Jewish men had a prayer - "I thank God that I was not born a gentile, or a slave, or a woman" (an interesting parallel to the expression in Galatians 3:28 - probably not a coincidence). Through Paul, God demolishes forever the three most abused social prejudices in history and declares that in Christ the barriers between men and God and between all segments of society are morally abolished.

V. Conclusion

We are one in Christ in terms of salvation, most certainly!
But we are also one in Christ in the Gospel Commission. There are two important factors that determine the ministry of each individual: the gifts of the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit. The Spirit of God determines the first.

"But all these gifts are the work of one and the same Spirit, distributing them separately to each individual at will." I Corinthians 12:11.

The second are also given by the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22 and Matthew 25:14-30).

The role of the church is to acknowledge what the Spirit hath given to the church through His chosen servants. When, through their commitment to Christ, any individuals demonstrate among us their calling by God to the ministry of pastoring, upon what basis shall we deny their calling and reject their ministry? Dare we place our judgment above the Holy Spirit? If the church of Christ, the community of God on earth, cannot model to the world a community where the barriers have been broken down, then where on earth are the searchers for truth and faith to look to find the acceptance of Christ modeled in a people preparing to live with Him in eternity?

And can the church of Jesus afford to deny the talents of grace and the labor of love that women bring in ministry to a church in which well over half of the membership are women and many of these abused and wounded by the battles of life in these peculiar times? This is not about women's rights. It's about being right with God and with the Word of God. It's a matter of moral integrity and justice.

And so, after long hours of prayer and study, I am nearing the end of this journey. Nearing the end, I say, because I am still journeying on this pathway. I have come to the settled conviction that when all the Scriptural evidence is laid side by side, we have ample evidence endorsing the full participation of women in pastoral ministry. But this journey will not be ended for any of us until the gifts of the Spirit, given to individuals in the church without discrimination, are permitted their full use for the accomplishment of God's good in the lives of all people living within our communities.

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