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Women in Ministry

Re-examining the Biblical Pattern

by *Jenny Baker*

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Recently, I was part of a church panel interviewing candidates for a youth worker post. The first couple of candidates were okay but not particularly impressive. Then we interviewed a young woman who was intelligent, experienced, and, above all, passionate about young people. She was clearly in a completely different league from the guys we'd seen earlier. When she'd left, the church leader burst out with, "Wow. She was amazing, but I never thought to employ a woman as my youth worker."

When she took up the post, it became clear that the congregation hadn't expected a female youth worker either. Profound tensions can arise in working relationships due to assumptions and expectations regarding gender roles. Different denominations have different views about these roles, but wherever you work, your attitude toward colleagues of the opposite sex will be colored by your theology, experience, and upbringing.

Theology can be a thorny factor. If you believe your understanding of what women can and can't do in ministry is stamped with the authority of God's word, then anything different is heresy, not just a new experience. And it's difficult to separate theology from upbringing. Do I think women shouldn't preach because that's God's word, or because the only preachers I heard growing up were men? What does the Bible really say about gender roles, without imposing our cultural and inherited expectations on the text? And most importantly, are our beliefs restricting the work of the Kingdom of God?

Men and women are different. However, problems arise when one tries to strictly define those differences and assign value judgments. "Men are rational; women are emotional" makes rational women an aberration and denies men the ability to be vulnerable. Even worse is when rationality is seen as a strength and emotionality a weakness.

Fortunately, it's precisely because men and women are different that they should be involved together. The men and women God calls together for a task will bring balanced experiences and insights and produce enriched ministry. What a shame if our understanding of the Bible is a barrier to that happening, rather than its motivation.

Though good Christians aren't supposed to admit this in public, it can be difficult to understand the Bible. That's particularly true of some of the passages about men and women. Even Paul appears to contradict himself, in one place telling women to keep quiet in church (1 Tim 2:11-12) and in another giving guidelines for them speaking out loud (1 Cor 11:5-10).

Let's take a fresh look at scripture, starting at the very beginning when male and female were first created.

## Creation

From Genesis 1:26-28, we get a sense of the unity of men and women and the partnership God intends. "Then God said 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'"

Both men and women are made in God's image; neither one reflects it alone. Together they're given the cultural mandate, the task of filling the earth and subduing it. God didn't say, "You take care of the home" to the woman and "You do the gathering" to the man. The unfolding and developing of creation was a task they were to do in partnership. There's no hierarchy in Genesis 1.

Genesis 2 gives another account. In verse 7 we're told that God makes a man from the dust of the earth and puts him in the garden. In this beautiful environment, God looks at Adam on his own and for the first time sees something in his creation that isn't good.

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner'" (2:18).

And so God makes Eve from Adam's rib so that she will be like him. Adam has just named all the animals and experienced the loneliness of realizing that none are like him. When he sees Eve he bursts into poetic raptures:

"Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken'" (2:23).

How much can we read into the fact that Eve was made from Adam's rib? Matthew Henry wrote, "She was not made out of his head to top him, nor out of his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his side to be equal to him, under his arm to be protected and near his heart to be beloved." She is his missing part; together they can do what man alone couldn't. Their relationship is one of intimacy and vulnerability—they stand naked together and feel no shame.

I grew up with the understanding that Eve is there to support Adam, to look after him, and to do all the things he doesn't like doing or is too important to do. She was to be the lady working hard behind the scenes, the role that the women took in the church where I grew up. But is that what God intended? The word *helper* in Hebrew is *ezer*, meaning a

counterpart, expected to engage fully in the same activities. It stresses the distinctiveness and complementary nature of work, not subordination or inferiority. In fact, in many places in the Old Testament, God is described as our *ezer*.

## The Fall

Then comes the voice of temptation. The serpent twists God's words, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (3:1). In this account, Eve wasn't there when God gave Adam the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and she gets it slightly wrong, adding, "Nor shall you touch it" (3:3). She's swayed by the serpent, eats of the fruit, and gives some to Adam. I grew up with the idea that this made Eve (and by extension all women) a bit gullible and not to be trusted, and that she ate of the fruit and went off to find Adam, apple in hand, saying "Try this, darling," and he eats not really knowing what it's all about. But chapter 3 verse 6 tells us that Adam is actually with Eve when she eats the fruit and so is just as responsible. Together they disobey God and everything is tragically and catastrophically changed.

When the accounting comes, God pronounces sentence on all three. It's important to understand the nature of these curses. They are descriptive, describing what has happened as the consequences of their disobedience, rather than prescriptive. God isn't saying, "I want this to happen." The punishment they reap from their sin is alienation from God, the creation, and each other.

These curses form the roots of the struggle for power between men and women. This is where individual, gender-based roles enter the scene. The woman is addressed in terms of relationships and family life. The consequences for the man are about work and environment. The mandate originally designed for a partnership is divided as a result of the fall.

But our gracious, compassionate God sent a redeemer to redeem that partnership (Col 1:15-20). Jesus came to restore our relationships with God and to restore and renew creation itself. Jesus came to see the Genesis curses undone, to see men and women's enmity and competition eliminated and partnership restored. As heralds of the kingdom, our goals should be the same—to live out the partnership and trust God first intended.

## Jesus' Example

How did Jesus treat women? Jesus didn't make any explicit statements about the roles of men and women; he did something far more radical. His actions and teachings about human relationships strike at the roots of a traditional hierarchical view of men and women. Jesus treated women in a radical way for his culture, as a sign of the renewed relationships of the kingdom.

The culture that Jesus was born into treated women as second-class citizens (if citizens at all). They were the possessions of their fathers and husbands, and not worth teaching. The Talmud said it would be better for the law to be burned than entrusted to a woman. A

Jewish male was forbidden to talk to a woman in public even if related to her. Pharisees would pray, "Thank you God that I am not a woman or a gentile." Yet Jesus spends time with women, he values them and treats them as equal to men.

When he visits the home of Martha and Mary, he gently rebukes Martha for doing the housework and missing the opportunity of learning at his feet with Mary and the male disciples (Luke 10:38-42). Much to the amazement of the disciples, he has a theological discussion with the woman at the well, someone that society considered beneath contempt (John 4). He is supported financially by women (Luke 8:1-3), tells parables about them (Matt 13:33; 25:1-13; Luke 15:8-10; 18:1-8), and allows a sinful woman to anoint him much to the horror of his host (Luke 7:36-40). Martha's confession that Jesus is the Christ (John 11:27) parallels that of Peter (Luke 9:20). A woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus by a group of men, wanting to trip him up, using her as the bait. When they are shamed and leave one by one, she stays (although presumably she could have slipped away too). Jesus doesn't condemn her as all the others have done but tells her to sin no more (John 8:1-11). And as many have commented, women are first at the cradle and last at the cross. When all the disciples run away and desert Jesus, the women come to anoint him for burial (Luke 23:55-24:1). In a culture that refuses to recognize women as witnesses in court, Jesus allows women to be the first witnesses of his resurrection (Matt 28:1-10) and to personally carry the news to the other disciples.

Jesus chooses 12 male disciples. If he wants women in leadership, it's argued, why doesn't he have a female apostle or two? He flouts many of the culture's conventions; so surely he could've included a woman, even though it would've been beyond radical at the time. Should we conclude, then, that all church leaders should be male? Some suggest that Jesus is choosing 12 new patriarchs—paralleling the 12 sons of Jacob—to establish a new Israel, and that he was symbolizing a new, inclusive people of God.

Only these 12 men take part in the Last Supper, but no one (one would hope) would exclude women from taking part in communion on that basis. Jesus didn't include any Gentiles among the apostles (although he did minister to them), but that doesn't mean Gentiles were excluded from the early church membership or leadership. Remember, Peter has to be persuaded in a dramatic way that the gospel is for Gentiles as well, and later has to defend his actions to others (Acts 10 and 11).

### Women of the Church

Women have been used to bring about God's purposes since the beginning of the Bible. True, women aren't mentioned as often as men, but they exercise leadership and authority and have their part to play in the unfolding of the biblical drama.

Miriam is a prophetess (Exodus 15:20) and a leader (Micah 6:4). Deborah is a judge, a leader of the Israelite people, holding a position of great authority. She settles disputes and delivers Israel from their enemies (Judges 4 & 5). Huldah is a respected prophetess (2 Kings 22:14) whose words carry significant weight. These women and others lead and use their gifts even though they're in a patriarchal society.

Abraham twice treats Sarah appallingly when he pretends she is his sister to save his own skin (Gen 12:11-13; Gen 20:1-18) and Isaac does the same with Rebekah. Lot offers his two daughters to the men of Sodom to protect his male guests (Gen 19:11). Is it then OK to treat women in this way; is this evidence of the inequality of the sexes? Gaebelin Hull, in her book *Equal to Serve* calls patriarchy the "true record of a false idea." Its inclusion in the Bible doesn't mean that God ordains it. The Bible uses many illustrations of one people dominating another, Egyptians oppressing the Hebrews, Haaman seeking to eradicate the Jews, but no one would suggest that we should emulate these examples. We need to recognize the oppression of women in the cultures of the Old and New Testaments for what it is...sin.

In the New Testament, Anna, a prophetess, rejoices at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:36-38). Priscilla, a fellow worker of Paul's, preaches the gospel and teaches (Acts 18:26). Dorcas is known for her acts of mercy and help to the poor (Acts 9:36). Phoebe is a deaconess, a minister, commended by Paul in Romans 16. An early church historian notes that "the fame of Phoebe was spoken of throughout the world." Paul greets a host of friends in Romans 16, one third of whom are women. When you look at those mentioned in connection with their ministries, there are more women than men. Junia, an apostle whose gender is not defined, is nonetheless most likely a female, although her gender has proved embarrassing to many seeking to exclude women from such roles. In the early nineteenth century, women went overseas as missionaries when they weren't allowed to serve God in Britain and other countries. Florence Nightingale went to nurse the wounded in the Crimean War. "I would have given the church my head, my heart, my hand. She would not have them. She told me to go back to do crochet in my mother's drawing room; or marry and look well at the head of my husband's table. 'You may go to Sunday school if you like it,' she said, but gave me no training even for that. She gave me neither work to do for her, nor education for it." Gladys Aylwood, Jackie Pullinger, and countless others have done pioneering work for the kingdom of God.

Some have suggested that God uses women only because there are no strong men around ("God spoke to Balaam through a donkey, so, in a pinch, I guess he can use women too!"). This seems a rather desperate and offensive attempt to explain away the Deborahs, Miriams, and Huldahs of the world. No, God is wise enough to choose and equip the right person for the right task, male or female.

#### Other New Testament Passages

What about verses dealing with headship, head coverings, silence, and submission? These need to be understood in the light of the partnership of men and women intended by God in creation, the liberating example of Jesus, and the history of women used by God in the church. These passages don't restrict the role of women in the kingdom as many have used them to do. Women are to learn and mature as disciples, and take their places alongside men in serving God.

While there are different interpretations of Paul's attitudes toward women, when set within the whole canon of Scripture, the biblical pattern is one in which women definitely have a leadership role to play. There's a clear biblical basis for partnership in ministry.

I long for the day when gender won't be an issue, when no one will hear, "you can't do that—you're a woman," when it'll no longer be assumed that just because a man is male he automatically has leadership skills and authority. I long for the day when gender becomes unimportant to the church, when we're able to work in the partnership and complementary nature that God intended, and when what qualifies a person for a job is her gifts and calling, not her gender.

So what are the next steps toward an equal church? Here are a few, as I see them:

**1. Listen to each other.** Many Christian women have felt oppressed by a rigid interpretation of the roles of men and women. They've encountered chauvinism and misogyny in the church and been hurt by it. Men, too, have had behavior dictated to them and certain areas of service denied them. We need to make ourselves vulnerable to one another and listen to those who've felt restricted by stereotypes and narrow expectations.

**2. Wrestle with theology.** Many people can't explain their theological positions; they've just absorbed them from families and early churches. We must continually refine our views through study, discussion, and prayer. It can be threatening to rethink something held dear, but it can also be liberating. Regardless, we need to have the proper attitude to those who differ on this issue so we can still work together.

**3. Relinquish power in the home and workplace.** Men don't need to feel threatened by women in leadership and authority—women using their gifts and serving in ministries. There's more than enough room in the Kingdom of God and more than enough work for us all. Men need to lay down power at work and allow women positions of responsibility without needing to retain ultimate control. Women need to lay down power in the home, which has been traditionally the only place they've been allowed it.

**4. Sacrifice.** Paul says that single people, with fewer ties, are freer to serve the Lord than married folk (1 Cor 7:32). Once a couple has children they're even more restrained. However, a woman involved in ministry doesn't have her gifts and callings disappear when she gives birth. She still needs to be obedient to that to which God has called her. Husbands and wives need to share the task of parenting and so give each other opportunities to grow and develop. Traditionally women have made sacrifices for men to continue their lives virtually unchanged by the addition of children. Husbands must also make sacrifices to enable their wives to continue using their spiritual gifts.

**5. Be role models.** Young people look to us as models of what it means to be a Christian man or woman—a big responsibility. We must pass on the right messages about gender issues through our attitudes, words, and actions.

**6. Be partners.** God meant men and women to work together, bringing complementary gifts and abilities to provide an enriched experience. Adam on his own wasn't good. Men and women are different, and that's exactly why they should be involved in all areas of life.

**7. Redress the balance.** It's often more true in the church than in any other area of society that women need to do a job twice as well to get half the recognition. Having been left out of certain areas for so long, women need active encouragement to redress the balance.

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