

“A Biblical Theological Reflection”

By

Jonathan Frymire, Master of Divinity student

For the Course: Theological Ethics

Dr. James Lewis, Professor

November 1, 2007

For my moral issue I have chosen the subject of gender equality in the church. I believe that women can and should serve in leadership roles in churches and they have been wrongly reprimanded for wanting to do so.

I can imagine that there may be someone who says, “This subject is not really a moral issue. Neither is it an ethical issue. This is really just a theological issue and is off topic for an ethics class. Save it for a theology class.” To that I respond: If we can talk about the equality of race in the church in a moral position paper, if we can talk about homosexuality and the church in a moral position paper, then we have a responsibility to deal with gender equality in the church (specifically church leadership) in a moral position paper; and to not treat this as a moral issue is dangerous and wrong.

To begin looking in the Bible for a biblical understanding of this issue we shall begin by looking at the big overall picture and then focus in more closely on a couple of passages. My argument is that women should be allowed to serve in leadership positions in the church. Therefore let’s look and see if we can first find some kind of theme or general affirmation of women as leaders.¹

As we scan through the Bible are there any texts that would affirm women in leadership? Genesis 1:24 says that both male and female were created in God’s image. Exodus 15:20 calls Miriam a prophetess. In Judges we find the story of Deborah, a judge (read: God appointed ruler) over the Israelites. In 2 Kings 22 the prophetess Huldah is asked to authenticate the book of the Law for King Josiah. It is important to note that Huldah is a contemporary to the more notable Jeremiah, and yet they ask for a word of the Lord from Huldah. The prophet Joel says “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (2:28 NIV). In Mark women are the first to see the empty tomb, and in Luke Mary Magdalene is the first to witness the risen Christ. In Acts and the Epistles we hear of Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia and others. What does all this mean? From my reading of the texts, it means that God does not care about gender related to

¹ Much of what follows is from a class by Dr. MaryAnn Hawkins, Associate Professor of Christian Mission, September 24, 2007.

leadership. God uses and calls whom he chooses for his purposes. Also it might suggest that Paul did not really have issues with women in ministry.

But we can also find verses that seem to speak out against women in leadership. First Timothy 2:11-15 is the most often used. I will speak more about this passage later. First Corinthians 11:3-9, 14:33-36, Ephesians 5:22, and Genesis 2 and 3 have all been used to support the idea that women are to be under the authority of men. But there is one thing to notice here and that is the difference in the volume of verses that support women. There are nearly 3 times as many places where women are shown in leadership and ministry positions compared to those that supposedly speak out against them. Even the text of 1 Corinthians 11:3-9 could be taken as support of women rather than a condemnation. Thus by looking at the Bible as a whole, it would seem that the Bible overwhelmingly supports women as leaders.

But what do we do with the texts that do not support women in leadership. As stated before, those texts *supposedly* spoke out against my position. I did not choose that word by accident. I believe that under close examination we would find that those texts do not say that women should not teach, preach, or have authority. Rather, we would see that those texts are written to specific situations where we would find that what is being said actually promotes gender equality in the church. To further illustrate this point we shall look more closely at a text that has been the primary weapon used against gender equality, i.e., 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

“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.” (NIV)

This passage is one of, if not the most hotly contested text relating to the role of women in the church. The first interpretation of this verse has led to a very literal understanding and led to the belief that women are not allowed to be teachers, pastors, deacons, elders, or in any position of authority in the church. Adherents to this line of thought argue that Paul is telling Timothy that women should not be placed in positions of authority. Women are to “learn quietly and in submission” (vs.11). The reason for this is because, as Paul writes in verse 13, that Adam was not tricked, Eve was the one deceived. Therefore women are more foolish and gullible than men. And since women are more susceptible to false teachings it would be considered prudent not to allow them to teach others since they could teach them bad theology and doctrines.

The question, however, is whether this interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12 is accurate. I personally do not believe it is accurately interpreted because Scripture as a

whole does not agree with that understanding of women. Neither, I believe, does Paul have this view of women.

I am greatly indebted to Richard and Catherine Kroeger for their work on this passage from 1 Timothy. Their book, *I Suffer Not a Woman*, has had a profound effect on how I have come to understand this text. In order to fully understand 1 Timothy, one needs to know the context of Ephesus.

The context of Ephesus was not a stereotypical ancient patriarchal society that we have tended to turn to as a default for understanding the ancient world. On the contrary Ephesus was extremely matriarchal. “In contrast to other parts of the ancient world, the primary deities in Asia Minor were female; and the maternal aspect was glorified in a manner almost unknown farther west.”² In fact, Ephesus had a temple to the goddess Artemis that was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World.³

Another point to consider is the role of Gnosticism in Ephesus. Gnosticism purports that the material world is evil and that knowledge (in Greek *gnosis*, from where we get Gnosticism) and the spirit are good. Furthermore, Gnosticism held up Eve and the serpent greater than Adam. “The Creator, the God of the Hebrew Bible, was evil because he had made the material world. The serpent was beneficent in helping Adam and Eve to shake off the deception perpetrated on them by the Creator, and Eve was the mediator who brought true knowledge to the human race.”⁴

The last piece of evidence that we need to look at is the word *authentein*, translated in my text as “authority over.” However, the Kroegers went back and reexamined this word. They found that the “earliest usages of *authentien* and related words mean to be responsible for something.”⁵ Their translation of 1 Timothy 2:12 thus reads, “I do not allow a woman to teach nor to proclaim herself author of man” or to help the connection, “responsible for man.”⁶ With this understanding of verse 12 the rest of the passage takes on new meaning. In verse 13 Paul is correcting the Gnostic idea that Eve gave life to Adam. In verse 14 he says that Adam was not deceived. Deceived here means fooled into not eating the fruit and thereby missing out on the secret knowledge. Eve was deceived into thinking that knowledge was for her and Adam to know. What Paul is doing in this passage is really correcting the warped theology that crept into the church at Ephesus through Gnosticism, a theology that has placed women in power over men and distorted the equality of the Gospel. Ultimately the text most used to keep women out of leadership positions in the church has turned out to be a passage that

² Kroeger, Richard Clark and Catherine Clark, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

ultimately defends the idea of gender equality and criticizes one gender ruling over another, regardless of which is which.

The last thing I would like to add to this discussion is the consistency with which women who have been called into ministry continue to communicate that call to others. Their articulation of their call is their defense. Their stories should “disarm” their opponents. By continuing to share God’s call on their life they change the argument. No longer is this just about biblical interpretation. Instead, the discussion is centered on the call. Did God call me? Yes, He did. Now it shifts the burden of proof to the dissenters to try to prove that God hasn’t called a woman into ministry. One cannot deny a person if God has truly called him or her. Helen Beard emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in ministry in general, but specifically in the ministry of women. She calls attention to spiritual gifts and that they are given to men and women alike, and that Acts gives us many examples of women teaching, preaching, and doing ministry in the church.⁷

This component brings a much more practical side to the discussion. We can argue and debate the interpretation of Paul’s writings or the church tradition on women in ministry until we are blue in the face. But, when it comes to the call of God on someone’s life, all that debating becomes a little superfluous. I think it challenges us to reexamine Scripture in light of what God is doing, rather than to deny what God is doing because it contradicts what we have decided that Scripture says on the topic.

I need to add a postscript regarding my position on women in ministry. I am deeply proud to be part of a movement that has such a full history of supporting women in ministry as the Church of God (Anderson, Ind). Yet, I am also just as deeply saddened that this movement has apparently abandoned the high moral ground it once held. I believe that the Church of God was once on the cusp of becoming a major influence in our culture. However, we lost that edge because we failed to step up when it mattered on issues of gender and racial equality. We are still feeling the pains of the poor choices we made not so long ago.

I also feel, however, that we can, by the grace of God, climb back into the culture battle by reclaiming what we failed to hold onto in past decades. I do not think it a coincidence that while the Church of God was struggling with issues of gender and racial equality here, it grew even larger as a movement out into the wider world. I wonder if the American Church of God would have kept pace with the Church of God around the world if we had held onto our beliefs about equality. I am thankful to a seminary community (i.e., Anderson University School of Theology, Anderson, Ind.) who has encouraged women in ministry and has helped me understand and articulate my commitment to gender equality in ministry leadership in the church.

⁷ Beard, Helen. *Women In Ministry Today*. (Plainsfield, NJ: Logos International, 1980) .