

- If we were to be open to appointing a woman, would this have any implications for the way we advertise and interview?

To conclude, another way of looking at this issue is to ask, what kind of church did Christ come to inaugurate, and what kind of leadership would advance that intention? Are women rightly restricted in the kind of leadership they exercise, or should gender be irrelevant, with pastoral leadership open to any whom the Spirit has gifted for that role?

Further Reading

Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* (Baker Books)
 Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Zondervan)
 Richard Briggs, *Gender and the New Testament* (Grove Books, B21)
 Ruth B Edwards, *The Case for Women's Ministry* (SPCK)
 RT France, *Women in the Church's Ministry* (Paternoster)
 RT France, *A Slippery Slope?* (Grove Books, B16)
 Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Macdonald, *A Woman's Place* (Fortress Press)
 R W Pierce and RM Groothuis (ed) *Discovering Biblical Equality* (IVP)
 Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders* (BRF/CPAS)

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women leaders in the church

A discussion paper

For churches considering the appointment of a woman as incumbent or for general discussion on women's ministry.

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Introduction

The decision of General Synod in 1992 that women could be ordained to the priesthood, and the first ordinations of women to the priesthood in 1994, led to new opportunities for women. Since then, women have been able to share in ministry alongside men, as curates and vicars, area deans, canons, deans and archdeacons. Women are trained and ordained alongside men, for the same ministries. And Bob Jackson's book, *The Road to Growth*, published in 2005, suggests that 'the ideal vicar' is a woman under 45 His research suggests that the small amount of work which has been done on women clergy shows that they are, on average, 'leading growing churches and being rather more successful in this than men.'

Over the past few years, some younger men and women in the Church have grown up seeing women in ministry and leadership as the norm. But for some, there are still questions, which may be even more sharply focused as the Church of England debates the issue of women in the episcopate.

Evangelicals believe in the supreme authority of Scripture. With this central tenet in mind, many evangelicals have assumed and some still believe, that certain Bible passages rule out the ordination of women. Others have studied the Bible, and are convinced that the Bible affirms the position of women as leaders in the Church. Others again, allow that women may be ordained, and that they can be part of a leadership team, but wonder whether a woman should be the overall leader of a church. What about 'headship', women being in 'submission', and 'teaching-authority'?

Fifteen years ago there were many debates on this subject, and plenty of material with which to inform discussions. Since then, scholarly thinking has continued, and many more Bible-believing people have become convinced that women in church leadership is biblical. While some Christians argue that justice, the fruit of women's ministry, feminism or the demands of mission makes women in leadership the right way forward, for evangelicals it must be a

stumbling block. A recent survey of clergy belief found that many women clergy have a liberal theology. But there are also many women clergy who are committed to biblical truth! And evangelicals must beware of lumping together the ordination of women with other issues such as the lobby for acceptance of homosexual relationships. Each issue must be individually examined.

Many evangelicals wish that this issue could be decided on a wider front, or that there could be agreement among evangelicals. However, this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. In a situation affecting our own local church and our own sphere of influence, we are called to do our best with the light we have.

Finally, if we agree that women as church leaders is in accordance with Scripture, what other issues do we need to consider? Some Christians, some churches, are convinced about the evidence of Scripture, but still say, 'We don't feel it's appropriate for us to have a woman as vicar now/yet.'

As I have already suggested, for some people, the hesitation about seeing a woman in the pulpit, behind the communion table, chairing the PCC or leading the church, has more to do with feelings and emotions than with theology. But these feelings need to be taken seriously and examined. To help in exploring these issues, here are some final questions:

- What preconceptions do we have about women, and women as leaders? Is there truth in them?
- What experiences have we had, good and bad, of women in leadership, which may influence our views?
- Has the whole congregation had experience of women in various leadership positions in the church?
- What are our expectations (if we have them) of a clergy spouse?
- How far are we prepared for a different style of leadership from what we are used to? (Style of leadership has more to do with personality than gender, but women *tend* to have a more collaborative style.)

appear here, when there is no headship in heaven (no marriage), nor in the teaching of Jesus or in Acts. The verse may be more about the unity of men and women, than about the 'authority' of one over another.

Thus any conclusion from these verses about 'headship' depends on a particular translation of these words, and also presupposes a quite debateable understanding of Genesis 1-3.

If the principle of 'headship' is based on creation, it must correspond to some difference in the created nature of men and women. Yet extensive research has failed to find what those differences are; observation of different cultures can only see generalised, not absolute, differences. And if, for example, some women do not possess leadership gifts, then the process for selecting a vicar, dean or bishop would be sufficient to exclude unsuitable women, just as it excludes unsuitable men. Furthermore, if this is a creation principle, it also excludes women from being prime ministers, professors, leaders in industry - or Sunday School teachers of male pupils.

As Gilbert Bilezikian writes, no human is ever designated in Scripture as sole leader of a church, or as its head. Headship belongs to Christ alone; and even here, headship is a servant function. 'The essence of Christian leadership is the courage to give, not the desire to rule'. (*Community 101*, p168)

- How much weight can we give to this passage in the discussion about women as leaders?
- Where does the 'authority' of a leader come from? From their own character, or from their calling by God and affirmation by the church?

In conclusion

What are the implications of accepting that women can and should take their place as leaders of churches? For some, the fact that theological liberals have made most of the running on this issue is a

question of conformity to Scripture. This discussion paper is designed to help church members to engage with the issues.

Some starting points

One of the important insights of the last fifteen years is that throwing texts over the parapet from each side of the debate is not in itself likely to get us to the truth. Nor can we resort to one person's 'straightforward reading' or 'plain meaning' versus another's 'interpretation'. We all bring our presuppositions to the task of interpretation, and we need to acknowledge what these are. If we have questions about women in leadership, is that really because we believe it's unscriptural, or is it because we're anxious about what it might feel like? Sometimes, too, psychological stereotyping (that men are rational, active, and initiators, while women are essentially emotional, passive, and dependent) affects our understanding of the Bible. In addition, too often our models of leadership are worldly patterns of hierarchy and domination rather than Jesus' patterns of humble servanthood and sharing.

Furthermore, all Scripture has to be interpreted - it is 'contextual'. God did not give us his Word in the form of a series of truths or principles to be obeyed or applied - however much we might wish he had, in the interests of clarity! All Scripture is contextual, so discussing its relevance in context does not mean capitulating to relativism.

Other principles which should determine our interpretation of Scripture are that obscure passages should be interpreted in the light of clearer passages or more pervasive teaching, and that all Scripture can ultimately be interpreted in the light of Jesus and his teaching.

The danger of writing something brief about this subject is over-simplifying. But when one can read dozens of books which discuss just one key passage of Scripture, some simplification is inevitable! At the end of this paper is some suggested further reading for those who would like to follow up what is written here.

Below are a number of sections, each with some questions for discussion. Looking at the whole sweep of Scripture is important, so the first sections look at the Old Testament.

Women and creation

Thinking about the place of women in the church takes us right back to the beginning of the Bible. Chapter 1 shows man and woman created in the image of God, and chapter 2 is a fuller account, showing woman created as a partner for man. Chapter 3 describes the Fall, and in it God predicts a future of domination by men and subordination for women.

- What conclusions do you draw about man and woman as they were created?
- Do you consider that the subordination of women was a punishment, or a prediction of the consequences of sin?
- Are we meant to see this pattern of domination and submission as God's pattern for all people for all time or as the result of sin? What implications does our view on this have for the world and for the church?

Women in the Old Testament

One key passage is Joel 2 and its fulfilment at Pentecost.

There are also examples of women in ministry in the Old Testament, despite the fact that the culture was patriarchal: Miriam (Exodus 15), Huldah (2 Kings 22), Deborah (Judges 4 and 5), Esther.

- What significance do you see in the prophecy of Joel, which speaks of 'sons and daughters', 'male and female slaves', receiving God's spirit?
- Why did King Josiah consult Huldah and accept her authority?
- What conclusions can we draw from the accounts of women leaders in the Old Testament?

therefore based on the created nature of men and women.

On the basis of this 'headship' argument, some evangelicals hold that women cannot be ordained, others that women may not be rectors or bishops (ie they must always be part of a team with a male leader). Another view takes seriously Paul's principle of male headship but also takes seriously the different cultural context of today, and therefore affirms women as leaders.

Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 11 contains at least two obscure Greek words: '*kephale*', often translated 'head' or sometimes 'source' (v3), and '*exousia*' ('authority', v10).

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee argues that the 'praying and prophesying' which are being discussed are not exclusive forms of ministry, but are meant to be a kind of shorthand for all ministry, both God-directed and community-directed. In this case, one may legitimately assume that both men and women shared in all expressions of Spirit gifting, including teaching and leadership, in the assembly.

Paul's basic point in v5ff is that a woman must have 'authority' 'on her head'. But what does this mean? While some people interpret this as meaning that a woman must be under someone else's authority, the word '*exousia*' is only used by Paul to mean authority held by the subject: the individual's right to act. This appears to relate to the subject of headcoverings, which clearly meant something to the Corinthians that it does not to us. If 'authority' means 'authority to act', then this passage is not about women being under the 'headship' of male leaders. What 'because of the angels' means (v10) is a mystery to almost everyone!

There is then the question of the word '*kephale*' in verse 3. There is considerable debate about whether this means 'head' or 'source'; and, if it does mean 'head', whether that has implications of 'authority over'. While some Christians find a notion of priority in creation order (see below), others find it strange for such a notion to

1 Timothy 2:11-15

A second difficult and controversial passage is 1 Timothy 2: 11-15. In Ephesus the problem seems to have been false teachers (a early form of Gnosticism), and a context of pagan worship in which the chief deity was a woman (Artemis/Diana) and her priests were also women.

Here Paul insists that women should learn (v11) - in order that they can understand the faith and combat heresy. The key word in verse 12 which has often been translated 'have authority' is notoriously obscure, but is traditionally interpreted 'usurp authority', giving a quite different understanding. Tom Wright translates: 'try to dictate to'; in other words, Paul did not want to give the impression that if women were allowed to learn they would take over and dictate to men, like in the cult of Artemis. Unlike some interpretations, this makes sense of the verses which follow: in reference to Adam and Eve, women need to learn as much as men do, so as to avoid being deceived; and while Gnosticism sometimes regarded women, because of their role in childbearing, as incapable of salvation, Paul assures women that their femininity is acceptable to God.

Again, Paul's short-term solution is that women should learn, and the long-term implication is that when they *are* as well taught as men, then they can take their place as teachers beside them.

- How would you apply 1 Timothy 2:8-15 to ministry in the church today?

Male headship?

For some, the most serious objection to women as church leaders is the appeal to the principle of male 'headship' which is apparently found in Paul's writings. This is held to mean that a man is in a position of responsible authority over his wife (Ephesians 5:22-33) and that the subordinate position of women must be reflected not only in the marriage relationship but also in the life of the church. Furthermore, it is argued that Paul based this principle on a interpretation of the creation narrative in Genesis 2. The principle is

Women in the intertestamental period

For much of the time between the exile and return, and the time of Christ, Judea was subject to foreign rulers, the Persians, Greeks and Romans. It is clear that during this time, the Jews were greatly influenced by their cultural environment, particularly in their attitude to women. The Jewish Talmud classifies women with slaves and heathen and assumes them incapable of learning God's Law.

Until marriage a Jewish girl was under her father's control; after marriage her husband assumed authority over her. A woman's prime responsibility was bearing and raising children, and women could take no part in a synagogue service. One rabbi replied to a woman's request to teach her the Law: 'It is better that the words of the Law should be burnt than that they should be given to a woman.'

- What are the benefits of understanding this context for a discussion of women in leadership?

Women in the ministry of Jesus

We have no direct teaching from Jesus on the subject of women, but Jesus' treatment of women is strikingly different from that of his contemporaries. He includes them as his followers (Luke 8:1-3), teaches them (Mary sits in the position of a disciple, at Jesus' feet, Luke 10:39), and sees them as individuals (John 4, Luke 8:43f). No Jewish rabbi had ever behaved like this before: they accepted only men as followers.

The women who supported Jesus throughout his ministry followed him to Calvary and watched until he died. After his burial they went to the tomb at the first opportunity. They were the first witnesses to the resurrection, and Mary Magdalene was 'apostle to the apostles' (John 20:1-18).

- How do you reflect on Jesus' response to Martha and Mary (Luke 10:41-2)?
- If Jesus chose to send a woman to tell the eleven that Jesus had

risen from the dead, what does this suggest about his attitude to women as disciples?

Women in the early Church

One of the difficulties about looking at women in Acts and Paul's letters is that some of the things Paul wrote appear to contradict some of his actions and other writings.

Many scholars have taken Galatians 3:28 as the 'magna carta' of humanity: Paul's teaching about sexual, racial and economic distinctions is revolutionary.

Women as well as men had opportunity to exercise spiritual gifts of public speaking, pastoral care, teaching and prophecy. It is worth noting that the word sometimes translated 'men' in Ephesians 4:8 is the Greek '*anthropos*', which should be translated 'human beings' or 'people'. In this major teaching passage no qualification on gifts or ministries is made on the grounds of sex. Similarly, while some people today argue for different 'roles' on the basis of stereotypes about women, there is no differentiation in Galatians 5 about the 'fruit' of the Spirit: 'gentleness' and 'kindness', for example, are not the prerogative of women.

New Testament examples of women in ministry include Phoebe the deacon (Rom 16:1), Priscilla the teacher (Acts 18:26 etc), Euodia and Syntyche, co-workers of Paul at Philippi (Philippians 4:2-3), and Junia the apostle (Romans 16:7). Given the number of women mentioned in Romans 16, it seems clear that they and others were prominent in the expansion of the church.

- What were the implications of Galatians 3:28 for New Testament times, and what are the implications for today?
- On the basis of the Gospels and Acts alone, in their cultural context, what would you conclude about the ministry of women?

Difficult passages

The 'traditional' view of women's role in church life is based on a few verses written by Paul. These passages are notoriously difficult to interpret, yet they have been used systematically for many years to prevent women from holding ministry and leadership positions in the church.

These particular passages need to be seen within the whole context of Scripture. In each case, there may be several interpretations currently put forward by scholars, and I have tried to outline those which do justice to the text and have become widely accepted. At the same time, they are not definitive—but there are no interpretations of these passages which are, and God may have yet more light to shed on his Word through future biblical and cultural scholars.

1 Corinthians 14:34-5

The reference to 'silence' and asking questions in this passage makes perfect sense in a context where women were not used to worshipping in a mixed group or participating in worship. It seems that they were calling out and asking questions.

The passage cannot mean that they are to be completely silent, since 1 Corinthians 11:5 refers to women praying and prophesying. The word in 14:34 often translated 'subordinate' may refer to submitting to the rules of the synagogue, or to the 'household codes' of the time, which would have seen interjections of women into the discussions of men as highly improper.

Paul's solution to this problem in Corinth is: in the short term for women to stop interrupting, and in the long term for women to learn the knowledge they lacked.