

the Bible and women's ministry

(revised March 2011)

For evangelicals, the case for women's ministry, as preachers, as priests, as ministers, as leaders, must be made from Scripture, our primary authority. For many years – and indeed, down the centuries – arguments have been made for restricting women's ministry and leadership, and for all leadership roles being open to women (any apparent restrictions, to be found, for example, in the letters of Paul, being of cultural, and not universal, application).

In the Anglican Church, the consensus has moved towards seeing women's leadership as in accord with Scripture, with many taking this for granted. Those, on the other hand, who hold a so-called 'complementarian' view, with different 'roles' for men and women, claim that Scripture excludes women from leadership or 'headship'. The debate in the Church of England about women bishops has highlighted the issue, particularly in relation to so-called 'headship'. Both 'sides' seeing their view as 'biblical'.

The heart of the question: does Scripture limit the leadership roles which are open to women? This short article cannot hope to do justice to all the nuances of scholarship, but I hope it will point readers to some recent re-readings of Scripture, and encourage all Christians to continue to study and think in this area.

Questioning our presuppositions

'Woman was made to be a help to man. But she was not fitted to be a help to man, except in generation, because another man would prove a more effective help in anything else.' (Aquinas)

'You are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach!' (Tertullian)

Some of the unhelpful ideas and stereotypes about women which we find in the Church and in society come from distorted interpretations of the Bible. It's important to realise that, despite their intentions, the views of early interpreters such as those above were often influenced by cultural norms and assumptions which were negative towards women, believing women to be inherently inferior to men.

One of the most important tasks of interpretation is to try to understand what the original writers meant, and this means exploring the cultural context. This does not mean selling out to cultural relativism, but is a reminder that we cannot simply read words written 2000 years ago and apply them directly to very different contexts today.

The debate in the Anglican Church about women bishops is a case in point. Despite years of scholarship, we are still not agreed on the role of an *episcopos*, or even if there was a common pattern throughout the New Testament churches. But the role was certainly different from that of a twenty-first century 'bishop'. So, even if we argue that there is evidence either for or against the existence of women as *episcopoi*, this does not settle the issue of whether there should be women bishops today. It is more important to discover whether this development fits the trajectory of the New Testament writings as a whole.

The following notes focus on some key texts throughout Scripture, summarising very briefly some recent scholarly conclusions. One of my central assumptions is that the Bible is the word of God and is authoritative. From this it follows that the Bible cannot contradict itself; there must be

some explanation for apparent contradictions. An important rule of interpretation is to understand unclear passages in terms of clear ones; we should not build a theology on the text of which the translation and interpretation are disputed.

My notes assume that Paul wrote the epistles attributed to him.

Old Testament

Genesis 1:27

Male and female are created equally in God's image. In verse 27a the Hebrew word *adam* means a human being, as opposed to *ish*, a man or husband. Equality does not mean sameness: to believe that men and women are created equal does not require one to adopt the view that there are no differences between men and women in how they think or act in the world.

Genesis 2:18

'Helper' (Hebrew, *ezer*) does not imply an inferior, as it may do in our everyday language. It is normally used of God, e.g. Psalm 20:2; 33:20; 70:5. The idea is of equality, complementarity, not inferiority.

Genesis 1-2 are about God's ideal; the rest of the Bible about what went wrong from the Fall onwards! Despite the equality granted at creation, women throughout Old Testament times continued to live in a patriarchal society in both social and religious spheres.

Genesis 3:16

'he shall rule over you' - this is a consequence of the Fall, not a command. It is sometimes argued that because male domination is a feature of nearly all societies it must be 'natural', or God's intention, but this is not necessarily the case. Thus the interpretation of this verse and the one above is crucial.

Joel 2:28-29

A promise of equality to those as yet unequal. Joel was shown a day without racial, sexual or economic tension, all the more amazing in an age of great inequality.

Jesus and Women

God's purposes for humanity, illustrated in creation, reach their culmination in Christ. Jesus came to bring in the kingdom of God, to restore that which had gone wrong. In a culture in which the male view of women was usually negative, and in which women's role was mainly limited to the domestic sphere, he treated women with respect, and disregarded the taboos and stereotypes of his culture. He healed women, affirmed their identity, used women as positive examples in his teaching, and encouraged women to be disciples.

We have to note that he chose twelve male apostles, but there are all kinds of reasons for this in the symbolic world in which he was operating and the practical and cultural world within which they would have to live and work. It is probable that the twelve were to be recognised as founding fathers of the new Israel, the counterpoint to the twelve male patriarchs. It is notable, however, that despite the singling out of these twelve, Jesus also had a significant number of women followers, and he seems to have encouraged them in their discipleship (and potential leadership) in the same way as he encouraged men (see the paper on 'How did Jesus develop women as leaders?') It was women who were last at the cross and first at the tomb. Nowhere does Jesus ever speak of the subordination of women or the 'headship' of men. In fact on several occasions he counters traditional views – for example that the main role of women is childbearing (Luke 11:27).

John 4: 4-29, NB v 27

The disciples were astonished, because respectable Jewish men would not normally associate with women in public. Jesus surprised the woman by speaking to her (not just because she was a Samaritan). He treated her with dignity and discussed theology with her, and many believed because of her (verse 39).

Luke 8:1-3

Luke highlights the fact that there were women among the travelling companions of Jesus. This is unknown for that time; and this group is highlighted alongside the twelve. In his gospel Luke shows how Jesus raised the profile of women, by pairing men and women in stories of healings and parables. Women are shown in this gospel as better disciples than men. They are there at the foot of the cross (23:49), as the body is placed in the tomb (23:55), and as witnesses to the resurrection (24:1-11).

Luke 10:38-42

Jesus affirms Mary for sitting at his feet (the position of a disciple, one who was in training to teach others), rather than doing household tasks. Martha must have listened on other occasions, to have made the great acknowledgement in John 11:27 that he was the Messiah (sooner than any men understood this). Most women at that time were not well taught in religious matters, or thought to be worth teaching.

John 20:10-18

Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene and the other women - yet the testimony of a woman was believed to be worthless. The resurrection accounts rely heavily on women as first witnesses of the resurrection. Mary was tasked with passing on the message, and was 'apostle to the apostles'.

Paul: women in the early Church

This respect for and inclusion of women as shown by Jesus laid the foundation for the positive place of women in early churches. In Acts and Romans we see the radical new position of women. Acts frequently cites women as being in positions of leadership in the fledgling Christian communities, and Paul's teaching presupposes that the Spirit can bestow the same gifts of ministry on both men and women.

Acts 2:1-4, 16-18

Acts 2 is vital in setting out what the new age of the church should look like. Joel's prophecy fulfilled, barriers broken down; when the Spirit is present, men and women may proclaim the word of the Lord in power. This was potentially highly subversive in a very hierarchical society (as Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures were, despite some differences between them).

Acts 8:3, 17:4

Brief mentions of women. If they warranted imprisoning, they must have been leaders in the community. A number of wealthy women believed.

Acts 18:24-26; Romans 16:3

On two occasions Priscilla is mentioned first, which may imply she had the more prominent role, and she was clearly involved in instructing Apollos.

Romans 16:1

Phoebe, a deacon (*diakonos*). Deacon is sometimes used to mean 'one who serves', but later this became a specific church office. There is no good reason to translate as 'servant' when applied to Phoebe, but 'deacon' or 'minister' when applied to Paul or Tychicus.

What exactly a *diakonos* did is not clear, but there is no suggestion that her ministry was lesser than that of men, or was a ministry only to women.

Romans 16:7

Junia... 'prominent among the apostles'. This person is sometimes assumed to be a man, Junias (a name unknown), on the assumption that an apostle could not be a woman. But recent scholarship strongly suggests that the person in question was female.

Galatians 3:28

...'there is no male and female'. This verse is not about ministry, but about the fact that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Tom Wright argues that Paul is quoting Genesis, and contravening those who wanted to enforce Jewish regulations on Gentile converts. It rules out any attempt to back up male privilege in God's new community. There are still disputes about what this implies, but it is difficult to argue for an equality before God which does not have implications for outworking in church and society.

What Paul taught about women is sometimes discussed as if limited to the 'difficult texts' below. But his teaching could surely not have contradicted his practice. Increasingly he is coming to be seen as remarkably egalitarian, following on Jesus' radically new attitude to women and seeing it worked out in churches, so far as the situation and culture would allow.

One reason thought to account for the disappearance of women from leadership in the early church is cultural accommodation. While women were managers of their households, and also involved in religious practices in Greek and Roman culture, such radical equality as Jesus and Paul taught was quite at variance with Greek and Roman culture, and the church, a small, persecuted minority, could not afford to challenge the status quo too radically. Initially, most women were not well taught, so were easy prey to the false teaching of cults.

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

This is often thought to be the most obscure passage Paul ever wrote. It is one text supposedly about 'headship' which rules out women's ordination or leadership.

But what does Paul mean by 'head' (verse 3)? Scholarly arguments have ranged back and forth, arguing 'head' and 'source'. Anthony Thistleton, in his 2000 commentary on 1 Corinthians, argued that to defend either 'authority over' or 'source' as a clear meaning for the Greek *kephale* could no longer be defended. The argument must be decided on contextual ground rather than lexical ones.

The context is church order. Paul was not talking about female insubordination to male authority, but some kind of gender distinctions; the main purpose of head coverings appears to have been modesty. In Paul's day, gender was marked by hair and clothing styles. In some ways, the gospel had brought a new freedom, but if, as has been argued, the only women who appeared in public without some kind of head covering were prostitutes, then it would not be surprising if Paul wanted women to conform to accepted norms, to avoid damaging the reputation of the church. Married women who went into public with uncovered heads could have been considered immodest. So Paul argues that a man dishonours his head by covering it in worship, and a woman dishonours hers by *not* covering it, following the kind of cultural norms where men have shorter hair and women longer. In worship it is important for men and women to be their true created selves.

1 Corinthians 14:34-5

Some conservative textual critics argue that this is an interpolation. But if it is not, it relates not to ministry but to the good order of worship services. Verse 14 cannot mean

absolute silence, since elsewhere there is mention of women praying and prophesying (see above). Silence is the kind of climate in which learning takes place. Wives, rather than interrupting the worship by calling out and asking questions, should ask their husbands at home. The long-term solution to this problem was that women should be educated. The passage cannot mean that women had no part in leading worship, speaking out loud as they did so, since that is the point made a few chapters earlier, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-11.

1 Timothy 2:11-15

This passage is often thought to be the main place where Paul denies women the role of teacher or leader in a congregation. Verse 12 seems to suggest that women must not be teachers, must not hold any authority over men, and must be silent.

There are issues here about both translation and context. The context again is public worship and prayer. The reason for addressing women is probably the same as above, i.e. that they were not yet taught. When Paul says women should 'learn' he is being positive. But they should learn quietly, like good pupils. There is considerable debate about the word often translated 'take authority'. Many recent commentators suggest that the emphasis of 'usurping' authority is correct (this was a common translation until the 1940s); what is forbidden is not teaching per se, but teaching in a domineering way.

There was much false teaching around in Ephesus, some spread through women. The solution is thus for them to learn. The point of the reference to Adam and Eve is that women need to learn just as much as men do. And it is possible that part of the false teaching which needed refuting was Gnostic or proto-Gnostic teaching that Eve was created first. Hence some women may have taught in a way which implied that women were superior to men. Verse 15 could refer to women being brought safely through childbirth, i.e. reversing the results of the Fall, refuting ideas that women, because of their role in childbearing, were unworthy of salvation. Childbirth may be difficult and painful, but that difficulty is not a curse, a sign of God's displeasure; salvation is promised to women who become mothers, just as it is to other women and to men. Alternatively, this verse could refer to 'the childbearing', i.e. the birth of Christ, who ushered in salvation, for men and women.

The principle of this passage is that 'those who do not understand the Scriptures and are not able to teach them accurately should not be permitted to teach others.' (Craig Keener)

This is Tom Wright's own translation of verses 11-15, which is radically different from that in many Bibles, but takes account of current thinking and makes sense of the whole passage:

[Women] must be allowed to study undisturbed, in full submission to God. I'm not saying that women should teach men, or try to dictate to them; they should be left undisturbed. Adam was created first, you see, and then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived, and fell into trespass. She will, however, be kept safe through the process of childbirth, if she continues in faith, love and holiness with prudence.

Ephesians 5:22-31

This passage concerns husbands and wives, rather than church order. In Greco-Roman culture, the idea that women and men might be equal partners in marriage did not exist. Women were normally much younger than their husbands, and marriage was not about love, but the purpose was to bear legitimate children. In the Greek world, women scarcely even joined their husbands and his friends at meals – hence the celebration of the Lord's Supper, where all ate together, would have seemed quite scandalous.

This passage is thus addressing the culture of the time. Wives are instructed to submit to their husbands (as they would be used to doing anyway), because as followers of Christ, Christians should submit to one another. What is striking is the context of mutual submission (verse 21), and the longer instruction to husbands (verses 25-33). The idea that this passage should be used to tell modern husbands to assume their proper role as head of their wives is inappropriate, since changes brought about by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution have banished any vestiges of the patronal culture which Paul was addressing.

In conclusion, arguments which are commonly produced to support male headship, or the exclusion of women from leadership in the Church, often rely on inaccurate Bible translations or outdated interpretations of Scripture. Another argument proposed in recent years, 'role subordination', relies on new and problematic understandings of the Trinity. But interpretations which take the culture of their first century context seriously may be more accurate than the 'plain meaning' approach of so-called 'complementarians', however well intentioned that may be. The small number of texts which have sometimes been taken to rule out women's priestly, episcopal or leadership ministries on further examination may not be held to do so, and many scholars increasingly argue that the biblical trajectory is in the direction of equality.

With regard to ordained ministry, as Tom Wright argued in a 2006 paper, 'there is a strong argument to say that only a ministry that is open to both men and women can properly represent Christ, who became, in the words of the Nicene Creed, *anthropos* (human), not *aner* (male).'

And looking at New Testament patterns, it might be argued that the ideal leadership is plural, men and women in complementary partnership, as at creation. The true complementarity of the new creation surely envisages men and women working together, representing the unity of the divine image together.

Further reading

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