

ECCLESIOLOGY
THE VISIBLE CHURCH

Lesson 24

The Woman's Role in the Church

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. To speak out on the place of women in the church in the 21st century is to invite controversy. The modern, unregenerate mind rebels at the biblical teaching on women. Even many Christians find it difficult to accept the scriptural role of women. The words that are controversial are “submission,” “obey,” and “headship.”
- B. It is fairly easy to determine what the bible teaches on women. It is much more difficult to relate it to certain cultures that are rebelling at anything the Bible teaches, not just the role of women. Those who oppose the biblical teaching claim that the unprogressive viewpoint of women as presented in the Bible is a first century cultural situation due to a patriarchal view of life. They are saying that women in the 21st century have been liberated and placed on equality with men. Therefore, women should have roles that are more prominent in society, and this carries over to the church as well.
- C. Those who hold to the biblical role of women will not win a popularity contest with the general public, especially in western cultures. The purpose of this lesson is not to degrade or suppress women in the local church but to discover what their role is and develop it to the maximum.

II. THE ROLE OF WOMEN

- A. As a created being. Woman was created for the man as seen in the original creation of Adam and Eve (1 Cor. 11:8). Woman is man's helper (Gen. 2:18) and soul mate (Gen. 2:22) and glory (1 Cor. 11:7). Man is the head of woman and woman is to be submissive to that headship (1 Cor. 11:3). God has established a divine pattern of authority in this world—God the Father over Christ, Christ over man, and man over woman. This is speaking about authority, not essence or nature. This has nothing to do with IQ, job skills, talents, abilities or social skills. A man is no more superior to a woman than the Father is superior to Christ. Certainly, Christ is not inferior to the Father and woman is not inferior to the man. The issue is headship or leadership. This is dealing with subordination in the order of creation, not inferiority. The Father is the leader of Christ; Christ is the leader of man; and man is the leader of woman.
- B. As a wife. Christian women are to be submissive wives to their husbands, recognizing the order of creation (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18). Stable Christian homes are the backbone for a spiritual local church. Being good wives is a calling, a work of the Lord and a work of the church (Prov. 12:4; 31:10). A wife must be submissive to her own husband and not to every man just because she is a woman. A woman voluntarily submits to the loving leadership of her husband.

- C. As a mother. Christian mothers are to bear children and bring them up in the Lord (1 Tim. 5:10, 14). The main domain of a woman is to raise her children which involves the physical, social, emotional and spiritual aspects of the child's life (Prov. 1:8; 6:20; 30:17). The main contribution a mother can make to the local church is to raise her children correctly under supervision of her husband. This is seen in Hannah and Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11, 27-28) and Lois and Eunice with Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15).
- D. As a mentor. Older Christian women have a responsibility to younger Christian women (Tit. 2:3-5). Young women are to be mentored by older women on how to be wise, affectionate towards their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, pure and good, to be active at home, kind and submissive to their husbands. This is done so the unsaved world will not mock Christianity.
- E. As a working woman. There is nothing in scripture that would keep a woman from having a profession, career or owning a legitimate business, as long as this did not interfere with her first responsibility, which is to be a wife and mother. A woman may go as far up the ladder in the professional world as her God-given talents will take her. The ideal woman of Proverbs 31 was able to carry on business ventures while tending for her family. Lydia was also a businesswoman (Acts 16:14-15). She and her whole house were baptized so we know she had children (maybe even small children), but she could carry out her private business.
- F. As prominent women. Throughout the Bible certain women are highly revered. Deborah (prophet and judge), Miriam (prophet and musician), Esther (queen who saved the Jews), Anna (prophet), Mary (mother of Jesus), etc. There are others, such as Naomi, Delilah, Abigail, Elizabeth and Mary Magdalene. A woman can hold any political office as long as it does not interfere with her being a wife and mother, her primary calling.

III. THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN TO THE OFFICE OF ELDER

- A. Issue. The issue is whether the Bible allows/permits a woman to be ordained and hold the office of elder. There are really only three verses that contribute to the argument pro or con.
- B. Galatians 3:28.
1. Those who believe in the ordination of women say that this verse clearly states that in Christ men and women are equal in every way, so women can be ordained. Female subordination has been abolished by the gospel and allows for women along with men to be ordained to the gospel ministry.
 2. Feminists say the subordination of women was a first century cultural issue but is not relevant today. They point out that Paul allowed for slavery but it is not relevant today. Slavery was a cultural issue but through the evolutionary process passed out of existence. This social issue stopped, so why not subordination of women?
 3. Answer
 - a. Male and female are spiritually equal in Christ. Yet there is an order of authority in the home and in the church. In Christ, husband and wife are on the same spiritual level, but God in His order of creation

has placed the husband over his wife in authority (headship, leadership). A woman is both equal and subordinate to the husband (not inferior, less intelligent or possessing fewer social or work skills).

- b. As for subordination of women being a cultural issue and over time passing out of existence, is that slavery was a social institution. However, subordination of women is part of the order of creation (Gen. 1-3). Slavery was not based on God's creation but female subordination is and it continues in the new creation in Christ.
- c. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that all the major prophets of the Old Testament, the Apostles of the New Testament and Jesus Christ Himself were men. Surely there is a plan in this pattern.

C. 1 Corinthians 14:33-35.

1. Those who believe in the ordination of women state that those who do not have misunderstood these verses which says woman are not to speak in church and remain silent which is part of the act of submission. They say this was a cultural situation in Corinth and does not apply today.
2. Answer:
 - a. These verses are in the broader context of praying and prophesying in the public meeting of the church.
 - b. There are various interpretations of these verses:
 - (1) Women are never to speak in church, but this is clearly contradicted by 1 Cor. 11:5 which allows women to pray and prophesy in church with their heads covered.
 - (2) Women are not to interrupt the preaching, but this context is not about preaching.
 - (3) Women were separated from the men in a worship service and there was a tendency for the women to chatter and gossip during the service, but this view is totally removed from the context of tongues and prophecy.
 - (4) Women are excluded from speaking in tongues in the public service, but the immediate context is about prophecy.
 - (5) Women are not to participate in the question and answer time, which was after the sermon, but this does not fit the context.
3. The best interpretation is that these verses are prohibiting women from participating in the final decisions about the legitimacy of any given prophecy. This act would be usurping authority over men who are to be the spiritual leaders (1 Tim. 2:12). Women are not to teach men in the public setting of the church, and discerning of legitimate prophecy would be a form of usurping authority over men.
4. This verse says nothing about the ordination of women to the office of elder, but it does speak to the issue of subordination in the interpretation of prophecy by women.

D. 1 Timothy 2:11-14

1. All feminists take this verse as a first century cultural situation in which a woman was forbidden to teach and have authority over men. This was a particular local Ephesian problem with woman being abusive in authority and giving in to the teaching of heresy which was exposed in First Timothy—a deviant approach to sexuality.

2. Their argument is that the word for “authority” occurs only here in the New Testament and is a negative term, which refers to the usurpation and abuse of authority, not the appropriate use of authority. They also point out in verses 8 and 9 the lifting up of hands in prayer by men and the dress for women in public worship are certainly cultural, so why not women teaching and having authority over men?
3. Answer . . .
 - a. The whole context of First Timothy is about public worship and how to conduct a local church. While men raising hands in prayer may be cultural, there is no reason why this should not happen all the time in worship services if we choose to be biblical. While women’s dress today may not be exactly the same as those of the Greeks, the principle is obvious that women are not to dress in the official meeting of the church in such a way as to draw attention to themselves. The word “authority” is unique, and women were abusing their authority and that was the problem. Yet, a transcultural reason is given as to why women are not to teach and have authority over men. Quotes from Genesis are given, taking one back to the original creation to show that Adam was formed first and then Eve. Adam had authority over Eve. In the Fall, Adam and Eve fell into sin. Eve was deceived but Adam willfully chose to sin. This verse may imply, because of her tender, trusting nature, a woman is more easily deceived and this wonderful characteristic may affect her ability to lead in the home and the church.
 - b. The teaching and authority in 1 Tim. 2:11-14 seems to deal in the area of leadership. A woman is not to be an elder (ruling or teaching) because elders are the final authority in the local church. Authority belongs to the man because of the original creation. This does not say a woman must always be silent in church, because 1 Cor. 11:5 says a woman may pray and prophecy in church. This does not say a woman cannot teach women, children and even men outside the official meeting of the church. Aquila and Priscilla were a teaching team. Priscilla had a definite part in teaching Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). Priscilla was a “fellow-worker” with the Apostle Paul (Rom. 16:3). Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned six times in the New Testament, and three of these times Priscilla is mentioned first. She was most likely a dynamic woman who was a great leader and teacher. Aquila and Priscilla had a house church, and she most likely taught with her husband and under his authority (especially if she was teaching men). This does not mean that a woman cannot have the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher, for a distinction must always be made between a spiritual gift and an office. There are many women with the gift of pastor-teacher who should be allowed to use that gift in the local church. Yet, ordination to the office of elder (teaching or ruling) belongs to adult males alone, based on the creation ordinance, which is never cultural.

IV. ORDINATION TO THE OFFICE OF DEACON

- A. A strong case can be made from the Bible for women being ordained to the office of Deacon. Christians obviously disagree over this issue and this topic should be dealt with lovingly, discerningly and biblically. The Bible must be our sole guide in this matter, not the tradition we belong to (although it must be respected) or the culture in which we participate. The key verses are Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11.
- B. Women are not to be ordained to the office of deacon. Those who take position give the following reasons.
1. The word “wives” (NIV) is most often translated “wives,” not “women.”
 2. The word “deacon” (Rom. 16:1) does not usually mean the office of deacon but is the ordinary word for “servant.”
 3. The words “in the same way” or “likewise” do not imply a class of officers.
 4. The omission of an article before “wives” is not uncommon and really proves nothing.
 5. 1 Tim. 3:11 probably implies that qualifications for elders’ wives as well as deacons’ wives.
 6. If some women were deacons, further qualifications would be unnecessary because the same qualifications would apply for deaconess as well as deacon.
- C. Women may be ordained to the office of deacon.
1. The Greek word translated “wives” (NIV) may also be translated “women” (NASB). The meaning must be based on the context. The title deacons is used as both masculine and feminine, as in Romans 16:1 by referring to Phoebe as a deacon (masculine). Therefore, it could not be employed in 1 Tim. 3:11 without causing confusion with the previous group of male deacons. Furthermore, it would be awkward to give the qualifications for the wife of a deacon and not give the qualification for the wife of an elder (overseer). The context demands a different reading.
 2. The use of the term “likewise” seems to indicate that Paul is making a transition to another class and to an office in the church: “It is necessary (*dei*—must) for the overseer to be blameless” (vs. 2). “Likewise (it is necessary for) the deacons (to be) dignified” (vs. 8). “Likewise (it is necessary for) women (to be) dignified” (vs. 11).
 3. The context of 3:8-13 is dealing with the qualifications for the office of Deacon. The qualifications for “deacons” and “women” (women deacons) are very similar. If this were talking about wives, why would the qualifications be so similar?

Deacons

Worthy of respect
Sincere (not two-faced)
Not indulging in much wine
Not pursuing dishonest gain

Women

Worthy of respect
Not malicious talkers
Temperate
Trustworthy in everything

These qualifications seem to be more than just general instructions for women in the local church (1 Tim. 2:9-15). These are special women in the church. Their qualifications are put on a level with those required of men deacons.

4. There is no grammar that would connect 1 Tim. 3:8-10 with 3:11. There is no pronoun "their" with the word "wives" nor is there even an article (cf. NIV). If Paul wanted to connect verses 8-10 with 11, he would have said, "their wives," but it just isn't there.
5. Phoebe is mentioned as a deaconess in Romans 16:1. She is said to be a "servant" (deacons) which can be translated "deacon." The present participle of the verb "to be" (*ousun*) is regularly used to identify an office (John 11:49; Acts 18:12). Phoebe was a deaconess in the Church of Cenchrea and was deserving of full recognition and support for her activities. She appears to be more than just a servant.
6. Some have asked, "Why didn't Paul just use the word "deaconess" in 1 Tim. 3:11? It could be that the word "deaconess" was not in existence at the time of the writing of 1 Timothy.
7. If it is properly understood that the office of Deacon is that of service and mercy with no judicial or ruling powers, there would be no conflict with having women deacons because they would not be teaching doctrine. The office of elder carries with it judicial and spiritual authority but the office of deacon does not. Nor is it ever indicated that a deacon has teaching responsibilities.

V. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. What can a woman do in the church? What is her role to the body of Christ?
A woman can do anything in the local church except be an ordained elder (teaching or ruling), but she possibly could be an ordained deaconess if one's ecclesiastical tradition allows for it.
- B. A woman can chair committees, teach women and children, instruct adult men outside the official meeting of the church, exercise the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher without the official office of elder, serve on any committee, use her musical skills, pray and prophesy, give testimony, usher, read scripture, evangelize and do many other ministries inside and outside the local church.
- C. What a woman cannot do is hold an official position of authority over a man whether that be in the church or in the home. The reason Christians and denominations do not ordain women is not because they don't like women, nor because they think they are not as talented as men (many women are more talented), nor because they think women are inferior to men (many women are far superior to men in IQ and other abilities), but because they honestly believe the Bible does not teach the ordination of women. God simply does not permit it.

VI. PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

- A. Why is it so important that only men be ordained to the office of elder?

Answer:

1. God has ordained it based on the creation order.
 2. A man-centered church will attract other men. A local church dominated by women will never be attractive to most men.
 3. Reach the man first for Christ and you most likely will reach the woman. But reach the women first and it is much more difficult to reach the man.
- B. What about women on the mission field? Among true Christians there are four approaches to the same problem.

1. Broad View: Women can be ordained to elder, so surely they can be an evangelist, church planter or missionary. The mission field in every capacity is open to all true Christian women.

Answer:

- a. This view assumes the Bible allows for the ordination of women to the office of elder. The evidence favors that women cannot be ordained elders.
 - b. Women can have great ministries as missionaries, but not in an ordained status. In some situations, they may teach adult men but they can always teach women and children.
2. Strict View: Only men should be official evangelists and missionaries.
 - a. The Apostle Paul, a missionary himself, was writing to mission churches. If there was ever a time when women were needed as elders, pastors and missionaries, this was the time.
 - b. This was the time to be pragmatic, but the Apostle Paul forbids women from being official missionaries (ordained evangelists and church planters).
 - c. It has only been a hundred years since women took such a prominent place in missions, and all the facts are not in yet. Just because many women have had success on the mission field, does not make it right or wrong. Success is not always based on the bible. All the results of women missionaries are not in and God alone is able to judge what is successful. By present day standards, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Noah would have been a failure, but they were in reality a spiritual success. A successful ministry is one that is operating according to God's Word regardless of the external results. If there is a shortage of men on the mission field, then we should pray that God would raise up more men, not send more women to do what God has said is to be done by men.

Answer:

- a. The strict view would keep all single women off the mission field, especially if it involves teaching men. One of the purposes God has in a person gifted with celibacy is that he/she can go places and do things that those who are married cannot do (1 Cor. 7:32-34 cf. 7:7).
 - b. The strict view does not take into consideration women like Priscilla who was a co-leader with her husband Aquila of Apollos.
 - c. Historically many single and married women have done a terrific ministry among nationals and God blessed it.
3. Practical View. Those who hold this view believe that only men should be missionaries, but they are also pragmatists. There are many times on the foreign fields when there are simply no men to do the work. The Apostle

Paul commanded not only that things be done decently and in order but that things be done. In such cases, it is better to do work with qualified women, even though this is not ideal, than to sit back and do nothing simply because there are no men. However, when a man is available for the job a woman is doing, then she should turn the work over to the man. This would then drive mission field methods to the Scriptural pattern.

Answer:

- a. Women have a Scriptural example in Priscilla of a woman who helped train men. Obviously in time when ordained men show up there needs to be a shifting of authority to men but women may continue to work under the authority of the ordained male leadership.
 - b. Practically, to ask women to completely set aside their work and remove themselves would be very difficult to do. Human nature would balk at this, but it would not balk at male leadership overseeing the ministry of women on the mission field.
4. Moderate View. Women can do anything on the mission field but cannot have an ordained status. They can't teach women and children and adult males if they have been given permission by a local church or mission board. Women cannot be elders (ruling or teaching) but can evangelize, teach and organize under the authority of a local church or mission board. Ultimate leadership must be male-oriented in order to be consistent with the creation order in marriage, home and church. When qualified male leadership arrives on a mission field dominated by women, the women must be willing to place themselves under that male leadership, not necessarily to give up the ministry they have been doing.