

## **Role of Women in Ministry**

**By Sandra Hovatter**

**A Starting Point:** Paul seems to provide an inconsistent position on the subject of women in ministry, and no matter on which side of the issue one falls, a defense must be made against passages which differ. I have found, however, that most people (lay and clergy) have not evaluated Scripture on the topic of women in ministry, but rather have taken what they had been taught as truth. In most cases, they hold to a surface reading of Paul's difficult passages and therefore take the position of moderately or severely limiting the roles that women may pursue within the church. Whether consciously or not, this effectively elevates the role of tradition above that of Scripture in their hermeneutics.

I appreciate R.T. France's discussion on the appropriateness of changing one's mind.<sup>1</sup> By discussing the example of NT leaders changing their minds about accepting Gentiles into the church, he softens the ground for the material that follows. He recognizes that those who have long-held the position of the subordination of women may experience guilt as they consider what is viewed as a more "liberal" position.

After wrestling with this topic for many years, my own position has changed considerably. I have transitioned from believing the surface reading of the difficult Pauline passages to believing that such a reading is not consistent with the Paul's other words and actions or with the whole voice of Scripture. As such, I will deal with the difficult passages from this premise: While the culture of biblical times undoubtedly placed women in subordinate roles most of the time, Scripture both explicitly<sup>2</sup> and implicitly<sup>3</sup> allows women to freely use their gifts in ways that honor God.

My own theology about the role of women in ministry derives from key passages that are not disputed or open to various interpretations: Genesis 2:18 and Galatians 3:26-28. In Genesis 2:18, God uses two key words to describe the role of women: helper and partner (NRSV). The word translated "helper" (עֵזֶר, 'ezer<sup>4</sup>) is used most often to describe God's relationship toward Israel, a role in which He is never subordinate. The word translated "partner" (נֶגֶד, neged) means "counterpart." Clearly, when God created woman, He did not intend her to fill a second-class role. Rather, He intended her to be an active and equal partner for man.

The Galatians passage states that in Christ there is no longer male or female. R.M. Ramsay believes that this passage provides the position of Paul that represents eternal truth and that all others are accommodations based on culture.<sup>5</sup> Paul was not saying that the two genders no longer exist (just as he wasn't saying that there were no longer Jews and Greeks or slaves and free men). What he was saying is that God is not a respecter or discriminator of persons. Within the Kingdom of God we are not limited by our cultural position in a society; we are all "sons" (v. 26, ESV) of God. As a "son" of God, my gender does not bar me from using the gifts and talents He has given me. According to the flesh I was born a Gentile, a barbarian and a woman; according to the Spirit I have been born a new creation in Christ. The old things have passed away.

Space does not allow additional development of the theme of freedom in ministry for women, but it is against this larger group of evidence that the three questionable passages must be examined.

**1 Corinthians 11:2-16:** This passage is so fraught with questions and apparent contradictions I would be loathe to establish any firm doctrine based on it. Verse 3 seems to place women (or wives) under the "headship" or "authority" of men (or their husbands). Verse 7 continues the theme by saying that woman is the glory of man. France concludes that a "priority" of men is identified but quickly points out that this priority is almost immediately negated by vv. 11-12 which stress mutual dependence on one another and both being dependent on God.<sup>6</sup>

To determine what Paul means at the beginning of v. 3, I find it necessary to start at the end. In what way is God the head of Christ? We know that the three are one, and yet Christ does only what He sees His Father do (John 5:19). It was through Christ that God created and saved the world. One cannot deny that Christ was with God when the plan of salvation was formed. He was both part of the planning process and submitted to the plan developed. If we look not at what Jesus *did* in comparison with what God *did*, but rather at the relationship between the two, we see Jesus modeling a co-equal yet submitted relationship. This is difficult to understand in our culture (as is the trinity itself, of course).

Is Paul really saying that the relationship between woman and man is analogous to that between Christ and God? If the answer is yes, then we first have a "oneness" that goes beyond most people's understanding

of the marriage relationship, we have a co-equal yet submitted partnership. Perhaps this is a conundrum that Paul cannot adequately put into words without the apparent contradictions and we cannot adequately grasp. Yet it is consistent with Gen 2 and Gal 3. Further, God created the marriage relationship to serve as a type of the co-equal but submitted partnership that we see Between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:25-32).

I find an argument by Keener<sup>7</sup> consistent with Scripture and the above discussion. He contends that Paul is suggesting that women surrender their “rights” for the furtherance of the Gospel. This is consistent with the message of the chapters before and after this passage. The word translated “authority” in 1 Cor 11:10 is translated “rights” in 1 Cor 9:18. Paul is essentially putting forth a series of arguments to support the premise of not causing a brother or sister to stumble as he did in his discussion of eating food offered to idols.<sup>8</sup> It is fully consistent with the requirement to “prefer one another” (Rom. 12:10, KJV).

The context of this passage seems totally culturally to me, as evidenced by Paul’s own words in v. 13 (“Judge for yourselves...”) and by his concluding statement in v. 16. Translated by most modern translations “...we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.” (NIV), the word translated “other” (τοιούτος , τοιούτος) would more accurately be rendered “such”<sup>9</sup> – “we have no such practice.” Paul is negating the cultural requirements he has just laid out by saying “but we don’t do that nor do any of the other churches.”

**1 Corinthians 14:26-40:** Of interest is one phrase that appears at the end of v. 33. In some translations it appears at the end of the paragraph; in other translations v. 33b begins a new paragraph which leads into v. 34. The meaning of the passage is changed dramatically by the different placements. In checking ten translations, six placed the phrase “as in all the churches of the saints” at the end of the discussion about maintaining orderly services. In four of the translations the phrase was placed at the beginning of the discussion about women being silent in the church. Is there to be orderliness in all the churches of the saints, or are women to be silent in all the churches of the saints? Clearly the former is true; whether the latter is true or not depends on how one interprets the entire passage.

As France points out, vv. 34-35 are a surprising divergence within Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts and orderliness in worship services.<sup>10</sup> Paul gives no indication that the verses preceding are gender specific,

leading us to believe that both men and women were prophesying, praying, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, etc. Paul's contention is not that this was being done by women, but that it was being done in a disorderly manner. Taken in this context, his instruction that women should be silent in church and if they have questions ask their husbands at home is reasonable and appropriate. He cannot mean that women are never to speak in church because in the preceding verse he has approved of their speaking. Paul concludes the discussion in vv. 39-40, encouraging both men and women to be eager to prophesy, not to forbid speaking in tongues, and to do all things decently. In this context, it is illogical that Paul meant that women are to be fully silent in all churches.

One word in this passage that might lend considerable weight to the "keep silent" command is "law" in v. 34. Keener's *IVP Commentary* addresses this by clarifying that there is no specific text in biblical law that requires silence or submission by women.<sup>11</sup> The commentary goes on to clarify that the term law is also used generally (as in 1 Cor 14:21) and "could be referring only to the generally subordinate position of women in Old Testament times."

**1 Timothy 2:8-15:** Keener describes this passage as the "only explicit prohibition in the entire Bible against women teaching, and one of only two texts that seem to appeal to the creation order to subordinate women in some manner..."<sup>12</sup> I would again submit that building a doctrine or principle for all ages based on a single passage is unwise and in this case risks prohibiting the call of God on women's lives.

France and Keener both point out that the word translated "silence" in v. 11 means a quietness of spirit or a quietly submissive attitude. France relates this to the "proper attitude of a Christian wife according to Pauline and other New Testament teaching."<sup>13</sup> Keener, on the other hand, describes it as the attitude that was "normally appropriate for novices in his day."<sup>14</sup> (Historians agree that women were significantly less educated than men during Paul's lifetime.) Keener strengthens his position by citing that the word translated "silence" is the same word used in 1 Tim 2:2 to describe the "peaceable life" appropriate for all Christians.

In v. 12 Paul goes on to say that a woman should not teach or have authority over a man (or her husband). Regarding the former, he does not define what kind of teaching, and we know that Paul allows

those women who have been trained to teach.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Timothy, to whom Paul is writing, learned about Christ from his mother and grandmother (2 Tim 1:5). France points out that the verb used for “have authority” is not used by any other NT writer and that if Paul’s intention was that a woman should never be in a position of authority over a man, he did it in a very clumsy way.<sup>16</sup> Because of the uniqueness of the verb we cannot be certain, but many commentators believe it has a more negative connotation, as translated in the KJV “usurp authority.” Keener translates the passage as “teaching in such a way as to take authority”<sup>17</sup>

I submit that in today’s church, there is no taking or usurping authority, rather there is the voluntarily placing of one’s self under the authority of a teacher. There is such freedom to move from church to church, to take specific classes or not, and to participate in various activities or not, that there is little “usurping” of authority. Granted, there is the authority inherent in specific positions, but unless a woman is taking those positions by force, I don’t see the application of this passage in today’s western culture.

Finally, Paul brings up a creation argument to support his position. We have seen that man being formed first in the creation narrative does not give him priority; rather, the creation of woman was specifically to provide a co-equal partner. There are a number of culturally based interpretations of the phrases about Eve being the one who sinned and being saved through child-bearing. Whether Paul is combating either the Jewish culture which denigrated Eve and by extension all women<sup>18</sup> or the Ephesian cult culture encouraging women not to bear children,<sup>19</sup> we cannot know. We can know that there are fully plausible interpretations of the passage that do not conflict with the primary voice of Scripture that gives women freedom to serve God.

**Conclusion:** Taken individually, these passages can be troublesome and seem to prohibit women from playing a significant role in the leadership of the church, but they cannot be taken individually. All of Scripture must be interpreted by the whole of what Scripture teaches. I have shown briefly that the restrictions in each of these passages was a cultural limitation. I am in agreement with F.F. Bruce in that the principles of the gospel take precedence over first-century forms.<sup>20</sup> We cannot allow the overshadowing of

first century culture to keep women from responding to God's call and depriving the Body of Christ of their talents.

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**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> R. T. France, *Women in the Church's Ministry, A Test Case for Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 16-20.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of this include Paul's instruction for older women to teach younger women (Titus 2:3), Priscilla was the more prominent of Priscilla and Aquila and undoubtedly took a lead role in their church (Rom 16:3, 9; 2 Tim 4:19), Junia was imprisoned with Paul (indicating that she was ministering with him) and he describes her as "prominent among the apostles" (NRSV), which some interpret as giving her the status of apostle.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of this include Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Cor 12:27-30 (Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts being given to each of us and each of us are to use our gifts); 1 Peter 2:9 (all believers are part of the royal priesthood).

<sup>4</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries Electronic Edition STEP Files* (Cedar Rapids: Parsons Technology, 1998), word H5828.

<sup>5</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wive: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), p. 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 44, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Strong, *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, word G5108. It is translated "such" in YLT and the NRSV (although the RSV translated it as "other").

<sup>10</sup> France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament Electronic Edition STEP Files* (Hiawatha: Parsons Technology, 1997), see discussion on 1 Cor 14:34.

<sup>12</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 101.

<sup>13</sup> France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 66.

<sup>14</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 107-108.

<sup>15</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 113 and Appendix A, pps 237-257.

<sup>16</sup> France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 66-67.

<sup>17</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 108.

<sup>18</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 113-115.

<sup>19</sup> France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 67-79.

<sup>20</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, xvii.

## Bibliography

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