

**WOMEN IN THE CHURCH -
ORDINATION
OR SUBORDINATION?**

Stephen P. Townsend

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1. INTRODUCTION

“If God could speak through Balaam's ass then no doubt He can speak through a woman.” So pronounced an elderly Christian gentleman in a mid-week discussion on the role of women in the church. This verbal bombshell was followed by lengthy silence as the rest of us in the room digested it and sought to control our reactions. The association of Christian women with Balaam's ass was disturbing but nevertheless, judging from their faces, more than a few found the concept quite entertaining. Uppermost in everyone's emotions, however, was shock at the radical nature of the suggestion. Most of those present had been raised in an environment in which women were not allowed to speak in church meetings involving adults of both sexes. Surely it would be contradicting the clear teaching of Scripture if God were to speak to His people through a woman?

Current Church Practice

The Christian churches are divided in their approach to the leadership and ministry of women. A few churches provide exactly the same opportunities for women as they do for men. At the other extreme some churches do not allow women to lead or teach in any area of church life, except perhaps in women's meetings and children's meetings. Once when asked to speak at a Sunday school prize-giving, I was taken aback to be told that I could only be present in the meeting while I was actually speaking; for the rest of the service I would have to wait outside, since it was being led by one of the women teachers!

In Britain only a few churches place such severe constraints on the public participation of women. Most of the non-episcopal denominations have for many years admitted women to the ministry, but this does not necessarily mean that all their member churches are in agreement. Recently the Church of England has debated the ordination of women to the priesthood with great vigour, exposing a division of opinion on the issue within its ranks which has seriously threatened its internal unity. The Roman Catholic Church has consistently opposed the ordination of women to the priesthood, as have the Orthodox churches.

The situation within independent evangelical and charismatic churches is less clear, but many, if not most, place some restrictions on the involvement of women in leadership and teaching ministries, defending this on Biblical grounds. This is not to say that there is common agreement on the teaching of Scripture on this issue; indeed interpretations of some of the more obscure passages differ widely. Some of the Plymouth Brethren assemblies do not even allow a woman to pray in mixed company. Most other independent evangelical churches do not forbid the public participation of a woman, but nevertheless typically deny her the right to be ordained as a minister, or to lead a group ministry. John

Stott, who, although an Anglican, is widely respected in the independent evangelical community, argues the case for the ordination of women clergy, but draws the line at their appointment as rectors or bishops.¹

The Case Against Women in Leadership

The case against the appointment of women to church leadership may be distilled to two main assertions:

- 1) the assertion based on created order, that the female is subordinate to the male, and hence a woman should not exercise authority over a man;
- 2) the assertion based on the nature of priesthood, that Christ is man and not woman, and hence the one who symbolically represents Christ before the congregation must be man and not woman.

Other assertions have been made (see, for example, Moore²) but these two are pivotal, and on them has centred most of the serious debate. They have considerable force, as is evidenced by the fact that male exclusivism in leadership went largely unchallenged in the church for at least 1800 years. In this the church conformed closely to accepted social custom, and it is not without significance that the present-day debate also reflects changing attitudes in the wider society.

The Centrality of the Gospel of Grace

The Church, however, should not be conforming to the world's changing ideologies and fancies. Rather it should be consistently presenting and applying the gospel in a prophetic way to the society in which it dwells. The New Testament church went through a long and potentially divisive debate on the question of the status of Gentile believers. This issue more than any other caused Paul to be vilified and persecuted by his fellow Jews, because he insisted that in Christ the barriers that once separated have now been broken down. Paul based his arguments squarely on the gospel of God's grace, and the consequential principle that in Christ there can be no distinction or discrimination on the basis of race, culture, ethnic origin, or anything else.

In the same way any position taken by the Church on the role and authority of women must spring from those principles of the gospel that have a bearing on the issue. The Church must be driven by the wind of the Spirit, not tossed about aimlessly by the gusts of male-chauvinism, feminism or self-determinism.

Summary of this Document

In the rest of this document a brief outline is given of the main evidence for the case against women in leadership. Then the gospel is investigated, in an attempt to identify general principles that apply to the position and ministry of women. In the light of the gospel other scriptures that have something to say on this issue are considered, particularly those relating to Creation, the Fall and its aftermath, Christ's teaching and example, and New-Testament church life. Finally the merits of the arguments against women in leadership are considered in the light of what has gone before, and conclusions are drawn.

2. THE CASE AGAINST ORDINATION

The Subordination Assertion

This assertion claims that God made man and woman to enjoy unity and equality before Him, but that He also prescribed specific roles for each gender. These roles reflect the image of God in mankind, and in particular the male reflects the ‘masculine’ attributes of God, and the female the ‘feminine’ attributes of God. The man’s role includes having authority (which does not necessarily imply superiority); the woman’s role includes being in submission (which does not necessarily imply inferiority). These roles derive from the Creation order, and are applied consistently in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:22-24). As a consequence of this divine principle of the subordination of the woman, it is not appropriate or possible for a woman to fulfil a role for which God created the man. In particular, she should be excluded from roles in which spiritual leadership and authority are exercised. (See ³ for an informative summary of the points for and against this assertion.)

Various other arguments are used by one proponent or another to support this conclusion. Some present the fact that leadership in the Bible is almost exclusively male, and that in particular Christ deliberately chose twelve men as His apostles, as substantial supportive evidence. Others appeal also to the consistent Tradition of the church since New Testament times as evidence of the Holy Spirit's endorsement.

The Representation Assertion

This assertion claims that church leaders appointed to specific offices become representatives of Christ in a special way. The pastor as an under-shepherd exercises the authority of Christ, the Good Shepherd. The minister preaching the word does so in the name of Christ, the Prophet. The function of the priest presiding over the Eucharist is to represent the presence of Christ, the great High Priest. The church leader is a symbol of Christ, and as such must authentically represent Him. It was essential in God’s purpose for Christ to become incarnate as a man, not just a human, and it is therefore inappropriate for a woman to be the symbol representing the presence of Christ in the assembly of His people. (See ⁴ for an informative summary of the points for and against this assertion.)

Various additional arguments are used to support this assertion. Some say that the prevalent use of masculine terms to describe God in Scripture implies that the man reflects the image of God in a more direct way than the woman.

Others argue that since the headship of Christ over the Church is symbolised in marriage by the authority of the husband over the wife, but not vice versa, so in the Church Christ's headship can only be symbolised by the authority of a male.

The Strength of the Case

Taken together these two assertions present a strong case for an exclusively male church leadership. The foundation of the arguments is in fundamental areas of the faith, touching on the nature of God, Christ and man, and derived from both Scripture and Tradition. If the advocates of the ordination of women are to achieve their objective without causing serious divisions within the Body of Christ then the alleged fallacies in these arguments have to be exposed in no uncertain manner.

There is very little middle ground for compromise; both camps cannot simultaneously be right. If the subordination party is correct, then no church office that involves (a) the exercise of authority over others, or (b) the representation of Christ should be open to a woman. To ordain women to one office (say the diaconate or the priesthood) but to exclude them from higher office (say eldership or the episcopate) may seem to be a reasonable compromise, but it is thoroughly inconsistent.

So we turn to the gospel to look for those principles that have a bearing on this issue.

3. THE GOSPEL

The gospel has to be the starting point for any investigation into the status and position of women in the Church. The gospel essentially sets people free by bringing them into an ever-deepening relationship with God through Jesus. Through the gospel a believer enters by faith into an experience of salvation by God's grace, is baptised into Christ, inherits the full rights of sonship, is anointed with the Holy Spirit, and is destined for future glory.

Salvation by Grace

Ephesians 2:8-9 declares that we are saved by God's grace through faith, not by our own merit or effort. The Cross is the great equaliser. Monarch and commoner, rich and poor, judge and convict, African and European - each has to put aside all personal worth and qualification, and depend solely on Christ for salvation.

As Toplady's familiar hymn puts it, *"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling."* A man brings nothing extra. A woman brings nothing extra. *"There is no difference,"* wrote Paul in Romans 3:22.

Moreover, the Bible teaches that salvation is a continuous process. A believer's progress in the Christian life is on precisely the same basis as its commencement - by grace through faith. *"As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so continue to walk in Him"* said Paul (Col 2:6). A believer's origins, merits, abilities and attainments count for nothing in God's scheme of things. If we are to please Him then we must do so by living by faith in Christ. Paul spoke in the strongest possible terms of the implications of this truth when he said, *"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ . . . I consider everything rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him"* (Phil 3:7-9). Being a Jew and a Pharisee brought Paul absolutely no advantage in the service of Christ. On the contrary, he counted them as liabilities. The only thing that gave him authority and ability in God's kingdom was his position in Christ. Anything outside of Christ in which he might have placed his confidence, he cast onto the rubbish tip.

We need to carefully consider the implications of what he was saying here. Being a man instead of a woman did not give him any additional rights, privileges or advantages; indeed in so far as he might be tempted to put any confidence in his manhood it was a hindrance and a liability.

Therefore to say that a man can do better or go further in Christ than a woman would be to deny the grace of God. To claim that a man has *per se* an intrinsic quality that enables him to minister more fully, more effectively, or more spiritually than a woman, would be to deny the grace of God. Every man and woman in the church, whatever their office or ministry, has to function on the same basis - *"Not I . . . but Christ"* (Gal 2:20).

Baptism into Christ

The gospel declares a believer's identification with Christ by baptism. At the point of repentance and faith a believer is placed 'in Christ', and consequently "*old things have passed away and all things have become new*" (2 Cor 5:17). The new believer is baptised into Christ, from which it follows that he or she has died with Christ and has been raised to new life in Him (Romans 6:3,4). Everything that was a disadvantage, a hindrance, or otherwise caused us to miss the mark was dealt with once and for all on the cross, and instead we have Christ's righteousness and merit imputed to us. The only merit we have is that of Christ Jesus, and whatever merit He has we all have by faith in Him (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

Paul emphasised this point to the Galatian believers: "*I have been crucified with Christ; and I live no longer, but Christ lives in me. And now the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me . . . For all of you who were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal 2:20; 3:27,28).

A female believer, just like a male believer, is clothed with Christ, possessing in him every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3-5). Whatever disadvantage there may have been in being a woman is now of no consequence, since she has died with Christ, and therefore she has died to all those disadvantages. And whatever advantage or merit before God there may have been in being male is now possessed in full by the Christian woman, since she has been raised with Christ, the perfect man, and all his merits have been imputed to her.

Full Rights of Sonship

The believer's position in Christ is not only a matter of receiving His imputed righteousness. God extends His grace even further when He bestows on His redeemed people individually the full rights of sons (Rom 8:14-17; Eph 1:5). Galatians 3:26,29 tells us, "*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . heirs according to the promise.*"

The term 'sons of God' that is used here is sometimes mis-translated 'children of God' (e.g. in the King James version). But the phrase is not sexist (as some may suppose), and is no accident. To have described us as 'sons and daughters' might indeed have made a distinction on the basis of gender. But the Holy Spirit, through the writer, insists that female believers are sons, with all the ensuing full rights of inheritance, just as male believers (Gal 4:5-7).

Anointed with the Holy Spirit

The guarantee of the believer's inheritance in Christ is the provision of the Holy Spirit. Through the anointing and filling of His Holy Spirit God equips His people for service.

The record in Acts 2 of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, in fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, reveals that the gift of the Holy Spirit is for all whom the Lord calls, and emphatically both men and women (Acts 2:16-18). As well as encouraging and guiding God's people, the Holy Spirit also clothes them with power. In particular He enables them to perceive the will of God, proclaim the word of God, and perform the works of God.

In order to equip His people for service God provides gifts, both to the Church (such as apostles, prophets, evangelists) and to the individual (such as prophesy, faith, miracles). These gifts are provided by grace alone (Eph 4:7), and not on the basis of personal merit or qualification. They are given according to the sovereign will of God (1 Cor 12:11), to be recognised by the church, not chosen or bestowed by the Church. They are given for the edification of the whole body (Eph 4:12), not just for one part or another.

These facts have certain implications for the ministry of women. Firstly, the Holy Spirit makes no distinction on the basis of sex when He distributes any of His gifts; He is sovereign, and He distributes them as He determines.

Secondly, when a church ordains a person to office it is giving its stamp of approval, by recognising the gifting of the Holy Spirit, authorising the individual to exercise the gift within the body, and supporting him or her by prayer and other means. To recognise the gifting of the Holy Spirit, but nevertheless to refuse ordination on the grounds that the person is not male, would be to disobey the Holy Spirit, to deprive the church of a gift that the Lord Himself had provided, and to divert the woman concerned to other areas of ministry for which she may well not be equipped.

Thirdly, the possibility that a gift might be given in order to exclusively edify only a part of the body is firmly repudiated (see 1 Cor 12:7,21-25). There is no place for the notion that men need not or should not learn from a woman with a teaching gift, or take direction from a woman with a gift of leadership. The human vessel, whether male or female, is but a channel of the grace of God, and to reject the grace because we don't approve of the channel would be the height of arrogance and folly.

Destined for Glory

The gospel declares that God brought the Church into being for a purpose. Not all of that purpose has been revealed yet, but this at least is known: God's intention is to indwell the Church, and through her to display His wisdom and His glory. She is His new creation, designed, chosen and constructed to reflect the all-surpassing brightness of his splendour, and the incomparable glory of his person (Ephesians 1:9-12,18-23; 2:6,7; 3:9-21).

In this way the Church with Christ Jesus as its Head fulfils the original purpose for which man, male and female, was created. God intended that in union with one another a man and a woman should display His likeness and glory (Gen 1:27; 5:1,2; 1 Corinthians 11:7). The effect of sin was to spoil the image of God in man; Christ came to deal with sin, to bring salvation, and in union with the Church to fulfil God's perfect plan.

Scripture portrays marriage between a man and a woman as a picture of the union between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). However it is just a picture, a foreshadowing of a greater reality, and one day marriage and the distinctive roles of men and women will pass away for ever, when the union between Christ and His Church is perfectly fulfilled (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:10).

Human sexuality and the distinction between male and female is part of this present age, which is passing away. Jesus taught that in the age to come there will be no sexual distinctions or roles (Luke 20:28-36). The Church belongs to the future age, and even though many of its members live in present age they are to be 'in it' and not 'of it' (John 17:14-16). Until the final redemption of our bodies we each retain our sexuality and the opportunity it affords to glorify God in the sanctity of marriage. But we should be clear

that sexual roles have to do with marriage in this present age, and not with the Church and the age to come.

Summary

The gospel declares that God receives men and women on the same terms, and affords them equal status in Christ and within the Church. Each believer, being clothed with Christ, receives all of His merits, and inherits the full rights of sonship. The Holy Spirit equips each one for service, according to His own sovereign purpose, without distinction on the basis of sex. Human sexuality has no direct relevance to God's purpose for the Church, which is to glorify God in union with Christ its Head.

4. CREATION PRINCIPLES

The Creation account and the New Testament commentaries on it, help to give an insight into God's intentions for the relationship between man and woman. However it is not obvious the extent to which the principles derived from these scriptures can be applied to general relationships between men and women in society. For instance, we might conclude that Adam was the spokesperson in his marriage, and perhaps infer from this that the man should fulfil this role in any marriage partnership; but it would be difficult to justify extending this to other relationships between men and women.

Unity

A first creation principle is that the man and woman were created to enjoy unity and equality before God (Genesis 1:26-29; 2:23-24; 5:2). They both received the same name from God, were made in the likeness of God, were blessed by God, were jointly given dominion over the earth and its creatures, and were together beneficiaries of his providence. In union with each other, as two persons made one flesh, they displayed the image and likeness of God.

Jesus applied this principle to all marriages, teaching that those who marry are joined by God in an indissoluble union (Matt 9:4-6). This essential 'oneness' implies equality - equal status, equal rights, equal ownership. Indeed Paul goes so far as to say that the man gives up the right of control over his own body to his partner, and vice versa (1 Cor 7:4).

Complementarity

In the marriage relationship there is also complementarity and mutual dependence (Gen 2:18-24). Adam and Eve were the same, but different, and the differences were designed to complement and strengthen.

The creation account emphasises the dependence of the man on the woman, in the sense that without her he was unfulfilled and incomplete. She was made **for** him, as his helper, so that together they might fulfil that for which he on his own was inadequate. The word translated 'helper' is used infrequently in the Old Testament, usually speaking of God Himself (e.g. Psalm 70:5). On the other rare occasions that the word is used of humans the idea conveyed is that of coming to the aid of another bringing additional resources, without which failure would be inevitable (e.g. Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:14).

The creation account also shows the dependence of the woman on the man, in that she was created after him, she was formed from him, she derived her name from him, and she was presented to him (Genesis 2:21-23). He gave to her a sense of purpose and

direction. In him she found the answer to questions such as “Where have I come from?” and “What am I here for?”

So then, the man was dependent on the woman, since she was created **for** him. And the woman was dependent on the man, since she was created **from** him. In neither case is there any sense of superiority of one over the other implied, but rather complementarity.

Mutual Submission

The New Testament writers taught that partners in marriage should submit themselves to each other out of love and respect (Eph 5:21-33; 1 Pet 3:1-7). Genesis 2:24 stresses that the man is to forsake his home and family in order to unite with his wife, and to give himself to her in selfless devotion. The kind of love required is like that of Christ Himself when He gave Himself up for the Church. The wife also is to submit herself to her husband, with due respect, even as the Church submits to Christ. Essentially such submitting is a matter of giving and yielding. The husband gives himself without qualification to his wife, and seeks her greatest good; the wife yields herself unreservedly to her husband, and seeks his highest honour.

Within marriage submission should be mutual, even though the mode of submission is different for the husband and the wife. Eph 5:21, which introduces the Ephesian passage on marriage, says “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” The writer explains that such submission is the duty of the married couple, not only because of their commitment to Christ, but also because of the nature of marriage itself. He illuminates these principles by means of a metaphor - the relationship between the head and the body - and by an example - the relationship between Christ and the church. Because the point being illustrated is mutual submission, not control and subservience, the example he gives is of Christ as Saviour, Sanctifier and Lover. He does not speak here of Christ exercising power and dominion in the Church, but of His giving Himself up completely for her.

The Christian principle of mutual submission does not imply an equality of position and role. As well as the husband-wife relationship Paul also applies the principle to parent-child and master-slave relationships, where one party has authority over and responsibility for the other (Eph 6:1-9). The rule is that each one has to render service ‘as to the Lord’ within the context of the relationship. Within marriage the context is mutual dependence, care and support, which is so vividly illustrated by the analogy with the head and the body.

The meaning of the head and body metaphor has been widely debated amongst Christians. Later we will consider it further, but for the moment three points should be noted about its use in this passage. Firstly, the metaphor is used to illustrate a principle already established (mutual submission), not to introduce a new principle. Secondly, it is used of Christ and the Church and of a husband and wife, but not otherwise of the relationship between a man and a woman. Thirdly, the role depicted for the head is that of self-sacrificial giving in order to make glorious the object of its love, not authority or control.

Summary

Three principles concerning the relationship between man and woman were introduced at creation: unity, complementarity, and mutual submission. These principles applied to the first marriage between Adam and Eve, and by extension to all subsequent marriages. It is not evident, however, that they may be extrapolated to other relationships between men and women. In particular the duty of a woman to yield herself to a man as

her head only applies within a relationship in which the man also gives himself to the woman, that is in marriage. A woman may submit **as a person** to another, be it leader of family, church or government; but she can only submit **as a woman** to her husband.

5. POST-FALL PRINCIPLES

Supremacy of the Male

After the Fall the perfect relationship between man and woman was radically altered in various ways (Gen 3:15-20). Previously the man's need and desire had been for his helper, but afterwards the woman's need and desire was for the man. Previously the woman had shared Adam's name (Gen 1:26,27), but afterwards the woman received the new name Eve, meaning 'life-giver', reflecting her role as the mother of all ensuing generations, but also foretelling the day when the Word of Life would be born of a woman. Previously they had enjoyed a relationship of unity and mutual submission; afterwards the man assumed a superior, dominant position over the woman. Selfless giving of each to the other was overtaken by self-centred desire for and dominance over the other.

To what extent this new supremacy of the man was a continuing effect of sin in mankind, or was God's sentence for the sin of the woman, is debatable.* But in practice it makes little difference. If it is the latter then for the believing woman it is satisfied by the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and it must be added to the list of other bonds from which she is set free (cf. 1 Tim 2:15). And whether it is the former or the latter we are entitled, indeed obliged, to work towards minimising its effect, just as we do for the sentence passed upon Adam through God's curse on the ground (Gen 3:17-19).

Undeniably the woman was, or became, weaker in certain physical ways, and the sinfulness of man led him to turn this to his own selfish advantage. The dominance of the male became a marked feature of human society as history developed. Social conventions and regulations sometimes protected women from abuse, but often in consequence restricted their freedom and gave them an inferior status to men. Only with the coming of Jesus, and the proclamation of the gospel, was this inequality seriously challenged, and the emancipation of women has followed wherever the gospel has been embraced.

A Male Priesthood

Another consequence of the Fall was the need for a means of mediation between God and man. The Aaronic priesthood, established under God's Covenant with Israel, was an exclusively male function. Only men directly descended from Aaron could be priests (Num 18:7), and they alone were allowed to present offerings and atoning sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. They were chosen by God to be set apart for this role (Heb 5:4). Similarly the male Levites were chosen to serve in the tabernacle (Num 8:24-26), although some tasks were performed (voluntarily) by women (see Ex 38:8, 2 Ch 35:25). The priests were not usually leaders of the community; this role was performed by elders (Ex 19:7,8; Lev 4:13-16).

*The balance of the argument is in favour of the former, since the man's role changed from headship, which involved selfless giving of himself, to rulership, which involved selfish exaltation of himself. We cannot say that God exalted the man, since this would have Him rewarding disobedience! Also it is significant that God placed a curse upon the serpent, and a curse upon the ground on account of the man's disobedience, but no curse upon the woman.

The High Priest was a type of Christ, as were the judge, prophet and monarch. It is noteworthy that only from the Levitical order and the priesthood were women specifically excluded, although the clear assumption and practice of the Israelites was for the ruling monarch to be male. In Israel there were women prophets (2 Ki 22:14), one of whom, Deborah, was judge and national leader of Israel (Judges 4:4,5). The judge exercised authority in God's name, commanding obedience, as did the priest (Deut 17:9-12).

It is instructive to ask why it was that God made the Aaronic priesthood an exclusively male function, but not the offices of prophet or judge. A partial, and tentative, explanation is that the priests were types of those who would become sons of God through Christ Jesus. All the (male) Levites, including the priests, were set apart for God's service as substitutes for the redeemed firstborn sons of the Israelites, whom God had claimed as His own possession at the Passover (Num 3:12,13). In this way the priests and Levites were types, not of Christ directly, but of all true believers, who present themselves to God as living sacrifices, in the likeness of His Son, and who offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to Him (1 Pet 2:5; Rom 12:1). The High Priest, who alone entered the inner sanctum on the Day of Atonement, was a type of Christ directly (Heb 6:19,20).

Whether or not this interpretation is adequate, it is quite clear that the old order has now been replaced by the reality of which it was but a shadow (Heb 10:1-14). Consequently the restriction of the Old Testament priesthood to men does not imply a similar constraint on the ordained priesthood in the Church, any more than does its restriction to descendants of Aaron.

Summary

The Fall spoiled the perfect relationship between man and woman, and consequently he assumed the position of ruler over her. We must be careful to distinguish between the Creation principle of the headship of the man within the marriage relationship, and the post-Fall principle of the rulership of the man over the woman. The former involved unselfish giving, the latter selfish domineering. This was particularly evident within marriage, but was also reflected in wider social structures. Nevertheless it was in God's purpose to appoint women (even married women) to leadership positions from time to time. The Levitical and priestly orders were instituted as exclusively male functions, but this was not because of any inherent superiority of the male, rather because these functions typified greater spiritual realities, that are now fulfilled in Christ. The overriding scriptural principle for leadership is that those whom God calls and equips should be acknowledged, respected and obeyed, without regard to sex.

6. THE TEACHING AND EXAMPLE OF CHRIST

Nothing definite is recorded of Jesus' teaching about the ministry of women; it is likely that He said little about it. He did present teaching about marriage, in response to questions. He reinforced the Creation principle of the unity and equality of the man and the woman in the marriage relationship, particularly stressing that God makes them one, and that divorce goes against His purposes (Mark 10:1-12). He also taught that the institution of marriage has relevance only for the present age. It has no meaning beyond the resurrection, since all those raised to life in Christ will be sons of God, with no sexual distinctions, in much the same way as the angels (Luke 20:27-38).

Restoration of the Status of Women

Concerning the status of women, Jesus was most radical in His example. At that time a Jewish woman was given a status beneath that of a man. Traditionally Judaism gives men and women different roles but equal rights (see, for example, Jonathan Sacks⁵). However, spiritual life in first-century Palestine was very far from reflecting this ideal. A woman was strictly subject to the head of the family. On marriage she became the legal property of her husband, only one step removed from a slave. She had no rights to formal education or professional training, and usually was offered neither, except for childhood instruction in the home. Indeed the Talmud actively discouraged the teaching of the law to women. Outside of the home she was not allowed to speak to a man, not even her husband.

Jesus, however, defied the social conventions about public conversation with women, not so as to stir up controversy, but in order to respond to needs (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 10:11-16; Luke 13:10-13; John 4:5-10). He seemed to welcome opportunities to teach women, which was unprecedented for a rabbi, and delivered some of His deepest revelations to individual women. Many responded to His ministry with wholehearted devotion (Matt 26:6-13; Lu 7:36-50; Lu 10:38-42; John 4:10-26; John 11:21-27). He received ministry from women, but apparently not from any of the male disciples except in His burial (Mark 15:40-41; Lu 8:2-3; Lu 23:55-24:1).

Women Chosen as the First Witnesses of the Resurrection

Most remarkable and significant, however, is Jesus' choice of women, particularly Mary Magdalene, to be the first witnesses of His resurrection, and to be appointed to declare His word to the Apostles and the rest of the disciples (Matt 28:1-10; Lu 24:1-10; John 20:11-18). These women were Christ's messengers to the infant church, apostles to the Apostles, having had a personal encounter with angels and with the risen Lord, and having been sent by Him with instructions to deliver the greatest sermon ever preached.

"The Lord is risen!" We can almost hear Mary's dramatic cry echoing around the upper room as the women burst through the doorway. And where is the triumphant response on the lips of the congregated disciples? Where the answering call, "He is risen indeed?" Instead the message falls on unreceptive, unbelieving ears. "*Their words seemed to them as idle tales,*" we read, "*and they did not believe them*" (Lu 24:11). Given the shock of the events surrounding the crucifixion, and the prevailing attitudes towards women, it is perhaps understandable that the menfolk dismissed Mary's story, but even so the Lord rebukes them for their folly (Lu 24:25).

That the risen Jesus did not appear first to Peter, or James and John, but rather to Mary and the other women, has a significance that the Church has been reluctant to face up to. These men were hand-picked as leaders of the Twelve; they had been privileged to observe the Transfiguration, they had been chosen to watch and pray with Him in Gethsemane. Appearing to them first, or indeed to the entire congregation at once, would have ensured immediate acceptance and maximum impact. Also, the Lord would have known that the women would not be believed. So why did He choose them to first bear the good news to the others? Partly this was to teach His followers that life from now on was to be by faith and not by sight (John 20:29). But He did not need to choose women to teach that lesson. In choosing the women He demonstrated that as Head of His Body He was, and would continue to be, free to appoint any member to minister in His name, **women included**. Leadership in the Church was not to be the prerogative of any select band of chosen ones, least of all men; it was **His** prerogative. Moreover, by choosing women as

first witnesses He disregarded the original Creation order; this time the woman came first and man followed.

Implications of an Exclusively Male Apostleship

Nevertheless, the twelve Apostles Jesus appointed to lead the newly-formed Church were men, and deliberately so. The question needs to be asked, did Jesus by so doing establish a principle that for all time church leaders should only be men? The honest reply has to be: not necessarily. Even if such a principle does apply, Jesus did not teach it by His choice of the Apostles. Indeed, the twelve He chose were not only men, but Jews who were educated professional men or tradesmen. He did not choose beggars, slaves, illiterate people, or Gentiles (even though He met plenty of each, and it was a Gentile whom Jesus commended more than any Jew for his faith). It is clear that in the first-century milieu, with the purpose of taking the gospel to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles, to have chosen any other than male, literate, socially-adept Jews would have been inappropriate. By so doing Jesus did not establish a precedent that no beggar, slave, illiterate person, Gentile or woman could ever hold office as a church leader. The rule in fact is quite simple: He, as sovereign Lord, appoints according to His own purpose, not ours.

7. NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES

The New Testament epistles contain frequent references to the position and ministry of women in the Church. In some cases where prescriptions are given it can be difficult to distinguish between absolute rules binding on the Church for all time, and rules that applied only to a specific church in a specific culture. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on us to “rightly divide the word of truth.” We have to guard against a frivolous approach that conveniently relegates all scriptural injunctions we do not like into a cultural dustbin. We also have to stand firm in the freedom we have in Christ, and avoid simplistic interpretations that take little or no account of context or the teaching of Scripture as a whole.

The Letter to the Galatians

We first look at the letter of Paul to the church in Galatia. The New Testament church proclaimed that the Gospel sets us free, that in Christ we are no longer under law but under grace, and that barriers which previously divided us are now broken down. But false teaching on the question of law and grace assailed the church, and it was to address such error that the letter to the Galatians was written. Time and again throughout the history of the Church the same issue has arisen in different guises.

In the early church the issue was whether Gentile converts to Christ should adhere to the Jewish law, and be circumcised, as a sign of their commitment. The Christian Jews advocating circumcision were not explicitly denying the atoning work of Christ, or that Gentiles could be saved; but they were insisting that every Gentile Christian should adopt Jewish practices (Gal 2:11-14). The arguments of the circumcision party were powerful and persuasive; both Peter and Barnabas were temporarily led astray. There can be little doubt that the fact that Jesus was a Jew, and perfectly kept the law, and that the twelve Apostles were Jews, would have featured prominently in the debate. Paul exposed the whole insidious error for what it was - a perversion of the gospel, that is not a gospel at all (Gal 1:6-7). Circumcision can no more be insisted on as a necessary step of obedience after salvation, than being a devout Jew can be required as a prerequisite for salvation. For Paul

the whole question was decisively answered by the principle of our identification with Christ in His death, and in His resurrection life (Gal 2:19-21). This being so we must act in line with it, he insisted (Gal 2:14).

The dispute about the position of women in the church is different to the circumcision dispute in this respect: the circumcision dispute concerned **how** a person is justified; the sexuality dispute concerns the **outcome** of justification. The issue is whether justification means something different for women than it does for men.

We are justified by being brought into line with God's measure, that is Christ, and consequently we receive the full rights of sons (Gal 4:5-7) - "*blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ,*" wrote Paul to the Ephesian church (Eph 1:3). One aspect of that blessing is the privilege of eagerly seeking specific spiritual gifts and aspiring to oversight in the church, to be a channel of God's grace for His glory (1 Cor 14:1; 1 Tim 3:1). If a woman, by reason of her sex, has that privilege curtailed by being excluded from certain areas of gifting and service, then the rights of sonship she enjoys in Christ are only partially that which a man enjoys; she is blessed with spiritual blessings in Christ, but not to the same extent that a man is. This is tantamount to saying that the outcome of justification for a woman is different to that for a man, in plain contradiction of Galatians 3:26-4:7.

Ephesians 5: 21-33

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul drew back the curtain to give a glimpse of God's eternal purpose in Christ Jesus and in the Church. He urged his readers to live lives worthy of their calling, and outlined the implications of this in various scenarios. In the latter part of chapter 5 he considered how God's purpose for the believer affects Christian marriage.

In marriage, as in other relationships, the believer has to work out the implications of the need to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21). Paul described the marriage relationship using the head and body as a metaphor, and Christ and the Church as an example. Through the metaphor of the head and the body he illustrated the Creation principles of unity, complementarity and mutual submission. By combining this picture with the example of Christ and the Church he explained what Christian submission involves in the context of marriage.

The husband expresses his submission by giving himself selflessly to and for his wife, nourishing her, loving her and seeking the very best for her. The wife expresses her submission by yielding herself to her husband, and seeking his highest honour. Thus the meaning of headship for the husband is devotion, not domination. It is summed up by Christ's example, whereby He gave up his own life to save the Church, and devoted Himself to the task of ensuring her well-being and spotless perfection.

Within the marriage relationship the man is to love his wife as his own body, and the woman is to seek honour for her husband as her own head. It is quite clear that these responsibilities apply only within marriage. A woman's head is her husband, not men in general. There is no suggestion that a woman should submit in this way to any other than her husband, or the man to any other than his wife. It follows that to insist on such submission of a woman to a man, or to men, outside of the sanctity and unity of marriage would be highly improper, amounting to a violation of her person.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church was written primarily to correct error and malpractice. Paul was responding both to a letter of enquiry from the church, and to other independent reports he had received. In the latter part of the letter, from chapter 7 to the end, he was mostly answering questions raised by the church. The subject matter of the questions is reasonably clear - for example marriage (7:1), food used for idol worship (8:1), spiritual gifts (12:1), giving for relief work (16:1) - but the specific problems posed by the church are not recorded. This makes an exact interpretation of Paul's replies difficult in some cases.

The first part of chapter 11 addresses the question of the deportment of men and women when they come together for worship and prayer. Paul was concerned that their practice should be uncontentious and conform to that of all the other churches (v 16). The main issue was whether or not women should be veiled[†] within the assembly of believers. The reason Paul gave for the use of the veil was that it was a symbol of honour and respect to the woman's head (v 5). In the light of verse 3 and Ephesian 5:23, the woman's head should be understood to mean her husband. (The same Greek word, γυνή, is used for 'woman' and 'wife', and similarly ἀνὴρ is used for 'man' and 'husband'; hence a precise translation into English is not always possible.)

The text does not say that the veil was a mark of submission to men in general, or to a male elder or bishop in particular. It is quite clear that submission was to the woman's head, that is her husband. How this applied to unmarried women is not made clear, but from 1 Cor 7:34,39 it is reasonable to infer that such women would submit to Christ as their head.

Wherever the veil has ceased to have any significance in society, its use for worship and prayer is unhelpful, since it no longer symbolises submission, and may tend instead to become a legalistic ritual. In this case the general instructions in 1 Tim 2:9-10 apply, that women should clothe themselves in suitably modest attire. In Western society it is a serious distortion of this passage to use it to insist on a woman wearing a hat for public worship; unlike the veil in the first century, the hat is not a symbol of modesty in our culture - sometimes quite the opposite.

1 Corinthians 14:26-40.

In this section of the letter Paul's main concern was that the public exercise of spiritual gifts should be carried out for mutual edification in an orderly manner. Opportunity should be provided for anyone to participate in a constructive way (v 26). Nevertheless he identified certain situations in which a person should keep quiet, which undoubtedly related to particular incidents that had arisen in the Corinthian church. Three such scenarios are described: when too many people want to speak in tongues, or there is no interpreter (v 28); when somebody prophesies at length to the exclusion of someone else's revelation (v 30); when women interrupt the worship with unnecessary questions (v 34-35). The principle Paul stressed is that what takes place must be for the edification of all; any activity which is purely for the benefit of one individual should be conducted privately.

[†]or 'covered' - the precise meaning is uncertain.

It is clear that the requirement for women to keep silent related to a specific problem at Corinth. As before Paul insisted that order in worship should conform to the normal practice of other churches (v 33). The injunction to silence cannot have been intended as a general prohibition of any kind of speaking, since this would have contradicted the precedent set by Jesus (Matt 28:9,10), the testimony of Scripture (Acts 2:17,18), the example of the early church (Acts 18:26; 21:9), and his own previous instructions (1 Cor 11:5; 12:7-11). The kind of speaking being prohibited was anything that did not contribute to worship or was not edifying.

The particular scenario of enquiring women needing to seek instruction of their husbands, indicates that the educational and social position of women was hardly better in Corinth than anywhere else at that time. In that context the regular interruptions to worship were dishonourable, and contravened the principle of the submission of the woman. Paul's reference to the law in this respect (Gen 2:24) is a clear indication that it was submission to the husband that he had in mind, since, as we have already noted, the law did not say that a woman was to submit to men in general but only to her husband in a relationship of unity and mutual submission.

Today Christian women are usually well educated, and indeed many may have a better understanding of spiritual truth than their husbands. Forms of worship are also considerably different to those of the first century. Therefore it is unlikely that the particular problems faced by the Corinthian church will arise in the same way. Nevertheless the two principles identified in this passage are as necessary now as before: (1) let all things be done for edification (v 27); (2) let all things be done decently and in order (v 40). Today a woman teaching the word of God, or otherwise contributing to worship, must satisfy these principles in such a way as to bring honour to her own husband, and not dishonour.

1 Timothy 2: 11-15

The first letter to Timothy was written to give guidance in matters relating to church oversight. Chapter 2 is primarily concerned with corporate prayer: the need to pray for society and its leadership; our confidence in the goodness and grace of God; and the requirement for holiness, faith and humility in the praying community. The text then proceeds to address a particular need of Christian women, with the instruction to "*Let a woman learn in quietness, in all submission*" (v 11). It is not clear whether this tuition specifically relates to prayer, or is more general. Whichever it is, the instruction amounts to an overthrowing of the Judaistic maxim that only men should be taught. Contrary to traditional practice, women should be encouraged and expected to learn.

The instruction is then qualified by the appendage, "*however, I do not allow the woman to teach or usurp authority over the man, but to be in quietness*" (v 12). The juxtaposition of learning and teaching is understandable, since the expected pattern of Christian discipleship is that those who learn should in turn teach others also (cf. Matt 28:20; 2 Tim 2:2). As women learn, so they will have a responsibility to teach, and the text here insists that such teaching must not be over the man in such a way as to undermine his authority. The references to quietness and a submissive attitude are reminiscent of some of the previous passages we have considered. The authority to which a woman submits is that of her husband (Eph 5:24). It is therefore entirely consistent with the other relevant scriptures, and with the remainder of this passage, to translate verse 12 as "*however, I do not allow the **wife** to teach or usurp authority over the **husband**, but to be in quietness.*"

In verses 13-15 three arguments are presented in support of the main instruction. In the absence of any indication to the contrary these should be understood as reasons why a woman should learn, rather than reasons why a woman should not usurp authority over her husband. The first reason derives from the order of creation: first Adam, then Eve. To Adam fell the responsibility of leading Eve into a full understanding of God's will; he was responsible for providing the loving and supportive environment in which she could flourish and completely fulfil her potential. To follow social convention and keep a woman in ignorance of the truth of God's word would be to contravene this Creation principle. Also Eve fell into sin by being deceived (as opposed to Adam who sinned deliberately and knowingly). Therefore to equip a woman to resist the wiles of the deceiver she should be established firmly in the word of God. Finally, sin led to suffering and grief in child-bearing for Eve. However, by learning (with her husband) to live a sanctified life of faith and love a woman will be delivered through that difficult experience. For these three reasons a woman should be given every opportunity to learn.

Having learned, a woman would be expected to teach others (see 2 Tim 2:2; Titus 2:3). Nevertheless, this passage contains a warning against abuse of the woman's newly found emancipation. It would be possible for a woman with superior theological and scriptural training to adopt an arrogant attitude towards her husband, and challenge his position as head of the relationship. True spirituality will reveal itself in a gentle and quiet spirit; such a woman will seek to promote her husband instead of putting him down (1 Peter 3:1-4).

We must beware of any tendency to individualism, which will threaten the marriage union. The ideal is for a married couple to work together in partnership, following the example of Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18-26). Today it is probably the activities of the men involved in ministry, rather than the women, that place most strains on marriage relationships.

1 Timothy 3: 1-13 and Titus 1:5-9

These passages outline the qualifications for elders (or overseers) and deacons. There is an assumption that such leaders will be men, with the possible exception of deacons (1 Tim 3:11). From these passages, and other evidence, we gather that very few women were appointed as leaders in the New Testament church. A good case for at least one female apostle can be made from Romans 16:7, but even so this was clearly exceptional. The dearth of female leaders is not in itself evidence of a policy of exclusion of women from leadership offices. Given the prevailing social attitudes, and the fact that so few women were taught in the scriptures, it would be surprising if it were otherwise.

The instruction that an overseer should be the husband of but one wife (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6) might be seen as implying that only a man can be an overseer. However, this would be a false conclusion from these verses, since by the same argument one would have to conclude that an overseer must be married and must have children (thereby excluding the entire Roman Catholic priesthood and episcopate).

Summary

The New Testament epistles affirm the status given to women by Jesus, and teach that in Christ all the rights and blessings of sonship are bestowed without regard to sex. Within marriage the creation principles of unity, complementarity and mutual submission continue to apply until the death of either partner. For the husband, as the 'head', this

involves devoting himself entirely to his wife, selflessly working for her greatest good. For the wife, as the 'body', this involves yielding herself entirely to her husband, seeking to promote his highest honour. This relationship between a man and a woman can only apply within the sanctity of marriage; in particular it would be improper to require a general submission of women to men, in society or in the Church. In the Church both men and women are given the freedom, opportunity and responsibility to contribute and serve for the edification of others. A woman must ensure that her ministry does not bring dishonour to her husband, or undermine his authority, or otherwise threaten their marriage relationship. Similarly a man must ensure that his ministry does not impair his selfless devotion to his wife, deprive her of her rights, or otherwise threaten their relationship. This latter point may not have been an issue in the first century Church; it certainly is now ‡.

8. CONCLUSION

Subordination

The Scripture consistently teaches the submission of the woman to the man, but only in the context of the marriage relationship. The wife's submission should be in response to her husband's giving of himself to her and for her in selfless devotion; their relationship should typify that between the Christ and the Church. The notion of a general one-sided subjection of women to men is a distortion of this high Biblical ideal.

The distinctive sexual roles of men and women do not continue beyond the grave. They have no relevance to the make-up of the Church, which belongs to the age to come, and not to the present age which is passing away. However, while the institutions of marriage and the Church exist side by side it is necessary to ensure that principles pertaining to the one are not undermined by those of the other. In practice this means that the freedom in Christ enjoyed by a married woman must be circumscribed by her duty to her husband, and vice versa. Such circumscription, however, does not necessarily preclude a married woman from appointment to the highest leadership office in the Church, any more than it precludes her from being monarch or prime minister.

Representation

Whether man represents the image of God more directly or fully than a woman is a moot point. It is clear, however, that man alone, in his fallen state, is quite incapable of standing in the place of God or Christ. He can only do so in so far as he is cleansed by the blood of Christ, and clothed with His merit and righteousness. If a male priest, elder, minister or bishop depends (even partly) upon his masculinity as a qualification for the role of representing Christ, then he automatically disqualifies himself, for his manhood is marred and essentially sinful. On the other hand a woman who ministers by faith in Christ and His imputed righteousness is as fully qualified as Christ Himself.

‡The example of Jesus in Ephesians 5 shows that the husband's privilege and responsibility is to promote the well-being of his wife and to provide an environment within which she can flourish and develop her gifts to their full potential, **even at the expense of his own rights, interests and self-fulfilment**. It is sobering to consider how little this principle is adhered to by church leaders today or recognised by those appointing them.

Whether or not one believes the ministerial priesthood has an iconic function[§] that is distinct from that of the royal priesthood of all believers is largely irrelevant to this issue (see Jewett ⁶). The only one who has a right to truly act in the place of Christ is one who is in Christ, clothed with Christ, chosen by Christ and anointed with the Spirit of Christ. The Scripture is quite clear that men and women alike share this grace.

Emancipation

Through the gospel God receives men and women on equal terms, affords them equal status within the Church, and bestows on each one the full rights of sonship. The Scripture declares that in Christ we are set free, we are no longer under law but under grace, and the barriers which previously divided us are now broken down. It has therefore to be a matter of no little wonder that Christians, even evangelical Christians with a long tradition of respect for Scripture, have seized upon an uncertain interpretation of a few selected passages in order to limit a woman's freedom in Christ, place her under law, and set her behind a barrier.

The simple requirements for belonging to the Church and effectively ministering within it are (1) be in Christ and (2) be filled with the Holy Spirit. These become realities in our experience through repentance and faith.

To maintain that women are not acceptable for certain areas of ministry is to claim that for these areas the conditions are extended: (1) be in Christ, (2) be filled with the Holy Spirit and (3) be male. However high a gloss we may put upon it, this is no longer a gospel of grace alone. And in spite of all the fine words we may offer in mitigation,** it relegates women to second-class citizenship in the kingdom of God.

This is not to say that while we have our sexual distinctions God does not use them for his glory, and for the benefit of his people. Nor is it to say that in particular circumstances a ministry may not be better performed by a woman or by a man. But having the freedom to fit particular ministries to particular circumstances is a long way removed from insisting dogmatically that certain types of ministry are the exclusive reserve of men. What damage such exclusivism has caused in hindering church growth, suppressing the word of God, and quenching the Holy Spirit, God alone knows.

When considering a person for ministry or office in the church, we should not see sexuality as a barrier any more than social background or ethnic origin. This conclusion may be uncomfortable to many, but it is unavoidable if we are to take seriously the teaching of the gospel. The question to be asked about candidates is, "What evidence is there of the grace of God upon them, and of the Holy Spirit's anointing, equipping them to fulfil this particular role or ministry?" If such grace and anointing are discerned and we deny them the opportunity of giving, and the church the benefit of receiving, then we oppose God Himself (cf. Acts 11:17). On the other hand if such grace and anointing are **not** present then it is gross presumption and folly to ordain or appoint, whether the candidate be man or woman.

[§]In fact the New Testament nowhere defines the ordained priesthood as an office in the Church, let alone bestows it with special iconic value. The main function of the priest was to represent the people before God, rather than the other way round. The prophet, however, did represent God before the people in a special way; it is noteworthy that men and women alike held this office in both the Old and New Testaments.

**Attempts to enhance the image of the doctrine of the subordination of women are a modern phenomenon. Our Christian forefathers had no compunction about designating women as spiritually inferior to men.

Further Reading

The following books are recommended to support a deeper Biblical study of the role of women in the church. The authors do not all assume the same position, and between them the texts should provide a sufficiently broad perspective to facilitate a discerning examination of the points for and against restrictions on the ministry of women.

James B Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective: a Study in Role Relationships and Authority* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1981).

Shirley Lees (ed.), *The Role of Women* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1984).

Ruth Edwards, *The Case for Women's Ministry* (SPCK, 1989).

¹John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Marshalls, 1984), pp 252-4.

²Peter Moore (ed.), *Man, Woman & Priesthood* (SPCK, 1973).

³*The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Second Report by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England* GS829 (1988), pp 42-72.

⁴*ibid.*, pp 21-41.

⁵Jonathan Sacks, 'The Role of Women in Judaism', in Peter Moore (ed.), *Man, Woman & Priesthood* (SPCK, 1973), pp 27-44.

⁶Paul K. Jewett, *The Ordination of Women* (Eerdmans, 1980), pp 13-25.