



Role of Women in the Church

The world around us advocates diversity and equality and the Bible also stresses both. Nowhere is equality more clearly proclaimed than in Paul's letter to the Galatians where it is written, *'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus'* (3:28). There are many differences of race, culture, education, experience, employment, wealth and gender, but all human beings are essentially equal. The Jew typically despises the Greek and the master the slave, yet Gentiles have an equal place in the church and the slave may be the bishop and the master just an ordinary member. Many cultures have regarded women as inferior to men, but the Scriptures teach their essential equality. Both men and women were created in the image of God, both are saved by the blood of Christ and both are children of God by adoption, equally loved by the Father and heirs of heaven. Yet God clearly lays down in Scripture different roles for men and women in the family and in the church.

What the role of women is not?

Some women could preach better sermons and be better pastors, but the Lord has chosen to give this function to males. It is plain that women are not to be preachers, for God says: *'Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church'* (1 Cor. 14:34-35). In another place the Lord directs, *'Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach'* (1 Tim. 2:11-12).

When it comes to office, again it is written, *'A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife'* (1 Tim. 3:2). Bishop (which simply means overseer) in the New Testament is synonymous with elder. They are two names for the same office. Only a man is envisaged as a bishop. The same is said with regard to deacons, *'Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well'* (1 Tim. 3:12). When the original deacons were appointed, *'seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom'* were sought whom the church could appoint over this business (Acts 6:3). Jesus did many revolutionary things. He could easily have appointed at least one woman apostle among the twelve. He had many fine women around Him but He did not choose any for this leadership role. This fits with the biblical teaching that men should lead in the churches, *'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man'* (1 Tim. 2:12).

What about public prayer? In many churches today open prayer is practised where men and women pray as they 'feel led'. However the Bible states, *'I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting'* (1 Tim. 2:8). The word used here in the Greek for 'men' is *andros*, males, not *anthropos*, man in general, males and females. So again it is laid down that men should lead in prayer. As the one leads, the rest are to join in with their 'Amens' (1 Cor. 14:16). This praying along with, and being present when prayers are made and the Word is preached, is what is meant by *'praying or prophesying'* in 1 Corinthians 11:5 — *'But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven'*. Women in the meeting of the church are to have their heads covered as a sign of subjection and submission to the God-ordained pattern. The head-covering is a symbol of authority ('power' in 1 Corinthians 11:10 translates the Greek word *'exousia'*, but 'authority' is a better translation here). It would seem that some women in Corinth removed their head-coverings in order to lead in worship. No, the woman is not allowed to publicly preach or prophesy and

similarly she is not allowed to lead in prayer. We are told that Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). This does not refer to public preaching which is excluded by the words in chapter 14 (1 Cor. 14:34). Rather it would seem to be the supernatural gift by which they could foretell the future, such as Agabus had (Acts 21:10), and which would involve specific messages for certain individuals and would normally be given in private.

Role of Women in the Church

Having dealt with the negatives we will now look at the positives. What are women to do in the churches? In no sense is it a limited role. There is plenty to keep everyone busy.

1. Good works

In his first letter to Timothy the Apostle speaks of some needy old women who were to receive preferential treatment by the church. Where widows had children, the family were to look after them, but if they were on their own, widows indeed, they were to be looked after by the church and in return would give themselves to supplications and prayers. Only the very best were to be chosen for this special position. It is worth noting the distinguishing characteristics of these godly women. One is, *'Well reported of for good works ... if she have diligently followed every good work'* (1 Tim. 5:10). All of us will one day be judged according to our works (Rev. 20:13). Good works are kind deeds and they show that our faith is real. There is huge scope here for all women and of course for men too.

2. Bringing up children

One of the features of these specially-godly women is, *'if she have brought up children'* (1 Tim. 5:10). This is something not particularly valued today. When children are born the question is soon asked of the young mother, 'When are you going back to work?' The all-important thing is to earn money and progress in one's career. Yet, in the eyes of God, the caring for, and training of covenant children is of immense value. When we die, money and careers will be left behind but if we have brought up children for the Lord that will be something of value to all eternity. Not all women, of course, are given husbands and not all couples are given children, but where they are, they have something to do of immense value and eternal significance. Mothers are the main influence on young children and many of us thank God for our mothers and the mighty influence they were upon us under the hand of God. Even in secular terms, as the poet said, 'He that rocks the cradle rules the world'; how much more in spiritual terms?

3. Hospitality

A further point made by the Apostle here is, *'if she have lodged strangers'* (1 Tim. 5:10). No man was to be appointed as an elder but such as was *'given to hospitality'* (1 Tim. 3:2). Lydia's conversion was evidenced by the fact that *'she besought us, saying, if ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us'* (Acts 16:15). John writes to *'the elect lady and her children'* (2 Jn. 1). She was used to accommodating preachers but she must not receive heretics (v 10). Hospitality is an expression of Christian love.

4. Washing the saints' feet

Those women who were to be 'taken into the number' were such as had *'washed the saints' feet'* (1 Tim. 5:10). Jesus washed the disciples' feet and said, *'If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you'* (Jn. 13:14-15). Should we practise foot-washing? The pope, each year, ostentatiously washes the feet of some beggars in Rome. If one lived in the hot, dusty, Middle East, wore sandals and spent the day walking the roads, then the washing of one's feet would be a welcome relief on entering a home. However what we have here is a pattern not a precept. It calls us to acts of humble service done in kindness to others for their refreshment and comfort. The lowest servant in the house washed the feet and the godly should happily take that lowest position for the comfort of others.

5. Relieve the afflicted

Often when thinking of the role of women the emphasis is placed upon doing high-profile, self-exalting work. However, we see that the Scripture rather lays emphasis upon service. Jesus said, *'If any man (or woman) desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all'* (Mk. 9:35). Paul commends to Timothy the women who have *'relieved the afflicted'* (1 Tim. 5:10). This would entail visiting the sick or any who are needy, giving them time, providing support, comfort, medicines and food.

6. Supplications and Prayers

The kind of widow of whom the Apostle speaks here, *'trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day'* (1 Tim. 5:5). Few can estimate the value of the earnest prayers of godly women. Many congregations would be in a poor state but for this dedicated ministry carried out by godly women unnoticed by the world. Prayer is mighty because God is all-powerful and loves to answer the cries of His own.

7. Caring for ageing relatives

Much of the greatest work that we can do for God attracts little praise from man, but is a sweet savour, a beautiful deed, a delightful perfume to God. The Bible says, *'But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel'* (1 Tim. 5:8). Where widows had children the family were duty-bound to support them; *'let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed'* (v 16). In our day it is easy to place ageing relatives in a nursing home. Sometimes that is necessary because of the constant care (24/7) the loved one requires, but the ideal is for Christians to provide such care for their own. This is God-glorifying. As someone said, 'A poor parent can bring up ten children but ten rich children cannot care for one old parent'.

8. Listening to Jesus

Moving away from 1 Timothy 5 there is much teaching in the rest of Scripture. Martha and Mary entertained Jesus in their home. Martha felt the strain of having to provide a meal for so many and was angry with her sister for not helping more. She came to Jesus to complain: *'Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me'*. But we notice Jesus' surprising answer, *'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her'* (Lk. 10:40-42). Women are to choose the good part, studying the Word of God, listening to sermons and reading good books. In this way they will build up their theological knowledge and feed their faith and that of others.

9. Evangelism

One of the most effective evangelists in the Scripture was a woman, and a despised, sinful, Samaritan woman at that. When she found salvation herself she went to the people of her town and shouted, *'Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ? Then they went out of the city, and came unto him'* (Jn. 4:29-30). Many of the people of her town believed in Jesus because of her words and others believed when they heard Him for themselves. How many people are saved today through women who gossip the gospel to their friends and neighbours?

10. Witnesses of the Resurrection

In a day when women were generally despised it is worth noticing that the very first witness to whom Christ appeared after His resurrection was a woman (Jn. 20:15-17). Mary Magdalene then went and told the disciples what she had seen and heard. She proclaimed the risen Christ to the future leaders of the church. Why did He first appear to her? No doubt because of her great love, her presence at the cross till He died, her being first at the grave on the resurrection morning, but also so that all women would be encouraged to bear testimony to the risen Christ.

11. Teaching the younger women

Paul writes to Titus with regard to the older ladies, *'That they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed'* (Tit. 2:3-5). More mature women are to teach the younger ones and to be an example to them. 'Keepers at home' means keepers of the home and home-makers, a very important role for women. A home without a mother usually loses that which holds it together. Also, it is implied that as an extension of the home, women can teach the children of others, for example in a sabbath school.

12. Informal teaching of men

Women, as we noticed, are forbidden to preach or perform public teaching. However it is fascinating to notice how Priscilla was involved in informal and private teaching of a man. Apollos had arrived in Ephesus and preached in the synagogue with great eloquence and demonstrated a very considerable knowledge of the Scriptures, but he knew only the baptism of John. The book of Acts tells us, *'And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly'* (Acts 18:26). It was not simply Aquila who taught him but it is specially mentioned that Priscilla was involved. Perhaps she was the more gifted and theologically astute of the two. It could be argued that while husband and wife are mentioned together, it was actually Aquila who did the 'expounding'? But then why is her name given and not just here? Indeed in Romans 16:3 her name is given before her husband. Most other Christian workers would also have wives but they are not mentioned. Obviously she performed a very significant role in correcting the theology of Apollos. Women have a duty to share their knowledge of the Scriptures and of theology in an informal way and many a woman has been a great blessing in a private way and also in informal gatherings.

Conclusion

The Old Testament gives an account of many faithful and godly women who were very influential: Sarah, Rebekah, Deborah, Ruth, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther, to mention a few. Similarly in the New Testament we have Mary the mother of Jesus, Elisabeth, Anna, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Dorcas, Phebe, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Euodias and Syntyche and many more who laboured in the gospel and whose work was greatly appreciated by Paul and the early church.

Following his clear instruction that women are not to be public preachers the Apostle says, *'Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety'* (1 Tim.2:15). Many strange views are given of this verse. The simplest and most biblical way to understand it is that salvation comes through women in the sense that one bears the child, Jesus, through whom salvation comes to mankind. Although sin entered through a woman, deliverance also comes through a woman, Mary. Praise God for godly women!

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