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The Ministry of Women in the Church

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When Paul says, 'I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent', is he expressing his personal view in a particular situation or is he declaring that which is universally normative for church worship? Again when he argues from the creation narrative in Genesis does he see headship as superior authority or as a reference to the source of woman?

Was the order of deacons sufficiently developed in the New Testament churches to allow Phoebe to be classed as a woman deacon or was the emphasis still on gifts and opportunities for service? Which leads us to the question: Does the Spirit give new gifts and ministries to women in the Church today? Some argue for the distinction between teaching with authority and under the authority of the elders. Is this valid in the local church, in para-church ministries, in cross-cultural missions? Thus the place and contribution of women in the church continues to exercise the minds and hearts of those who accept the Scriptures as final authority in all matters of faith and conduct. The current feminist movement both heightens and observes these issues. As an increasing number of Church bodies legislate in favour of women deacons and elders and ordain women to the ministry of Word and Sacrament the question of freedom of conscience in such matters becomes more acute. The article below is one woman's response within the framework of her own denomination. Readers are invited to respond with letters and articles.

(Editor)

I FEMINISM AND THE CHRISTIAN

As a Christian, I obviously cannot agree with all that the feminists stand for. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that suffragettes of the last century and feminists of this century have had just cause for complaint in some areas; and mainly through their efforts, tremendous advances in recognizing women as people have been made in recent times—and needed to be. For example, as late as the end of the last century women in our society were treated legally as second-class citizens, without the right to vote, without the right to hold property and dispose of it, without the right to education, without the right to go to **P. 19** court, without the right to exercise their abilities in careers they themselves chose. All these rights, many long held by men, have been won for women in our society only comparatively recently. Yet still, today, some of the old stereotypes and attitudes remain, and Christian women and girls, in particular, are often presented with these as being God-given patterns for their behaviour.

It cannot be denied that the belief in the inferiority of women and the consequent demand for their repression in varying ways stretches across all cultures and from the earliest centuries. The ancient Jew prayed to God, 'I thank Thee that I am not a woman'. Even at the height of their culture, a low view of women existed in the Greek and Roman worlds and it is only in Greek art and poetry that women are heroines. Aristotle is said to have taught that women were inferior in every way, only a rank above slaves. Xenophon, the historian, wrote that women are best confined to an 'inside world'.

The early Church Fathers followed in the same line. Tertullian spoke of women as ‘the mothers of all ills’, Chrysostom wrote of women as ‘a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a deadly fascination’, almost, as Gladys Hunt suggests, as if women were designed by Satan instead of made in the image of God. Thomas Aquinas agreed with Aristotle that ‘woman is a misbegotten male’ and St. Augustine believed that women’s sole function is procreation. And what the early church fathers taught, the Christian church through the centuries, often believed was the pattern that God had ordained.

But was it? Or was it rather a cultural pattern, the outcome of sin, a pattern of the world to which the church too easily conformed? I believe it was the latter and, moreover, that this cultural pattern started right back at the Fall. Disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden disrupted not only the man to God relationship, not only the man to earth relationship, but also the man to woman relationship. The key verse in this argument is [Genesis 3:16](#), ‘Yet your desire shall be for you r husband and he shall rule over you’. Ross Palmer states:

‘The Fall and [Genesis 3](#) give no ground for saying that women are Divinely ordained to be dominated by men. Rather, domination is the result of sin and to be fought against with the aim to restore the original partnership God designed us for’.

So in that garden, at the very beginning of our history, the unity of the sexes, the enhancing, the complementing the one of the other, which was God’s original pattern was lost and instead domination and subjugation, superiority and inferiority became the characteristic attitudes. This was, indeed, not God’s original perfect pattern. It came p. 20 into the world as a result of sin and has remained in the world, as sin has remained.

ATTITUDE OF CHRIST

My recognition of the validity of the above view is supported when I look at the attitude Christ, the perfect man, untainted by sin, adopted towards women. It is very clear that Christ did not conform to all the rigid cultural patterns of His day as far as attitudes to members of the opposite sex were concerned. He moved about in the company of women with a freedom unknown to the teachers of His day. In an analysis of person-to-person healings or interviews in the gospels of Luke and John it is interesting to note that, apart from His time with His disciples, Jesus in Luke healed or talked with women on ten separate occasions and with men on eighteen occasions. In John, which is among other things the gospel of personal discourse or interview, there are four major sessions with individual men and four also with individual women. Even His disciples marvelled that He, a rabbi, should hold a conversation with a woman, the woman of Samaria, in public. But He did. And moreover to that very woman the Lord gave the first revelation that He was the Messiah. The cultural patterns of that day further decreed that women could not be taught the scriptures—but Jesus did to Mary and others; that women could not bear witness—but Jesus deliberately commissioned a woman, Mary Magdalene, to be the first witness of the resurrection and bear His message to the disciples. In the incident of the woman sick for twelve years with the flow of blood Jesus allowed her to touch Him, He spoke to her, and healed her. This was indeed a major break with the tradition of His day when women in such a physical condition were regarded as unclean and untouchable. Unquestionably on these and many other occasions Jesus sought to give women full dignity and freedom as persons. Their womanhood was no barrier.

Jesus was thus prepared to make a sharp break with contemporary culture in order to give women this dignity and freedom as persons. Because of Him Paul could write, ‘There

is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’.

This ideal of personhood, each individual’s worth as a person, with different qualities, characteristics, abilities, responsibility, but nonetheless the equal worth of each person of whatever race (‘Jew or Greek’) of whatever position (‘slave or free’) of whatever sex (‘male or female’) is a basic Scriptural principle. [p. 21](#)

If this view of women and their personhood, as expressed above, is accepted as Biblical then there is a need for Christians to examine the attitudes towards women which are woven into our society and find their way into parts of our church life. It is because of this that I can find myself identifying with much of moderate feminism. We need to recall that some of the great liberalising social movements of the 19th century—abolition of slavery and child labour, for example, were begun and carried through by sincere, committed Christians. It is pertinent to note that they did this, sometimes, against the beliefs and wishes of fellow Christians some of whom considered they could justify the continuation of slavery, for example, from Scripture. But nevertheless, they did it, and I doubt whether any Christians today would argue for slavery as being a God-ordained condition. In a similar way, if we all as Christians, whether women or men, are prepared to seek the true Christ-like attitude to women and not rely on tradition and man-made cultural patterns of past and present then, in this matter also we would be seen as doing something of God’s work of freeing from the shackles of sin.

II THE PLACE AND CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

One of the sad things about the history of the Christian church over the centuries is that there have been times when tradition and man-made cultural attitudes within it have distorted the originally given truth, whether principle or practice. This is certainly true when one considers some of the attitudes adopted by sections of the Church over the years towards the place and contribution of Christian women.

You can walk into Durham Cathedral today in England and see, etched there in the concrete floor a long way back from the high altar, a line marking the point beyond which no woman could go in mediaeval times during a Church service. The reason? Because she might be ‘unclean’ and therefore likely to contaminate the worship! Of course, such a barrier is no longer countenanced.

But there are nevertheless other taboos and restrictions placed upon Christian women today in different sections of the Christian church, restrictions particularly upon how they are permitted to contribute to the ongoing work of the church. The General Secretary of the Netherlands Bible Society in 1974 at the Lausanne Congress stated in one address:

The personal worth of women must be recognized and their talents must not be confined. Women in our churches are often second-class Christians whose role is only to make the tea and butter the scones! [p. 22](#)

How true this is even today in some of our churches. Let me hasten to add, however, that making tea and buttering scones is a very much appreciated and very necessary service, and all honour to the many Christian women who do this ‘as to the Lord’. But the point of the above statement is that a domestic role such as this is regarded sometimes as the *only* role women in the church can play. The contention of this article is that the contribution and place of women in the church can and must be much wider than this and that Scriptural truth unmarred by tradition and prejudice supports this. As an Australian clergyman Kevin Giles states:

If we are to be faithful to what Jesus inaugurated in His life and death we must understand that for Christians the disruptive forces of sin have been overcome and man-made discrimination on the basis of sex or race annulled. Jesus broke completely with the customary attitudes to women and bestowed on them the dignity, equality and responsibility Eve once knew in the Garden of Eden. If we do less to our sisters in Christ we are not obedient disciples of His, and we show that we have little grasp of the theological significance of His coming.

And the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Robert Runcie, in a recent statement said:

The church's ministry to women, at least in my own tradition, is often exercised badly and insensitively.

He further commented that on reading the extent of women's sufferings in a male dominated church:

I felt ... the incredible pain and agony of it all and with it the extraordinary love and patient endurance and perseverance which lies behind it.

In writing this article the thesis I wish to put forward is that sex is not of itself a determiner of place and contribution in the church, and that therefore some women can exercise forms of church leadership and church teaching in the same way as some men can. I believe in the inspiration of God's Word as originally given and I am aware that traditionally the church has not interpreted the Scripture as giving to women these opportunities. But I also believe that much of that traditional interpretation has been mistaken, just as was the traditional stand taken by many Christians last century in North America who opposed the emancipation of slaves on what they claimed to be the teaching of the Bible. To argue this case fully would be impossible within the limits of this article, but I have selected three key aspects to elucidate in a little detail.

As a preliminary statement it must be noted that all of the teaching [p.23](#) about women and their place and contribution in the church comes in the epistles of the New Testament and most of it in those written by Paul. On the surface there is given in these, clear directions about the subordination of women both in the home and in the church. However, it is generally recognized that two difficulties present in many parts of the epistles are:

- (1) determining what is actually said, and,
- (2) deciding whether the various comments are directed to special local circumstances or whether they have general eternal significance.

Another point that must also be looked at when considering Paul's teaching is that his teaching and his practice must be seen to mesh together—he cannot teach one thing and practice another. And, indeed, it is Paul's practice that underlines the case that he accepted women into leadership and teaching roles within the church. A careful reading of Acts and the epistles indicates that there are more women holding responsible positions than has often been recognized. Such a one is Phoebe.

Phoebe in the Cenchreae Church

Phoebe is mentioned in [Romans 16](#) in a list of some 30 people of whom 10 are women, and seven of these are said to have engaged in some form of Christian ministry. Phoebe appears as a person of some importance, a deacon and leader of the church at Cenchreae, the port city of Corinth, and in all probability she was the one who carried Paul's epistle to Rome. The two titles describing her position are *diakonos* and *prostatis*. The first is

correctly translated 'deacon' (the feminine form 'deaconess' does not appear in the New Testament) and it is interesting to note that reference to other uses of this word and its cognates in the epistles shows that Paul frequently used *diakonos* of 'those who were active in preaching and teaching' (E. E. Ellis). It would be fair to assume that when Paul applied this word to Phoebe it also carried just this meaning.

The second word used to describe Phoebe is *prostatis*. This noun in this verse is translated variously as 'succourer', 'helper', 'good friend'. It is the only time it is used in the Bible in its feminine form and practically the only time it is translated as above. At other times it is translated with the primary meaning of 'standing before' or 'leading', e.g. Thessalonians [5:12](#) and [1 Timothy 5:17](#). (In a derived sense it includes the idea of protection. The leader protects those whom he leads). It seems significant that the translators of the Bible have preferred the lesser meaning for the feminine form and retained the stronger meaning for the masculine form. But it was also done with the [p. 24](#) word *diakonos* which appears 22 times in the New Testament. In the authorized version it is rendered 'minister' 18 times, 'deacon' three times and 'servant' only in this passage concerning a woman!

Therefore I believe, in going back to the original, it can be fairly argued that Paul spoke of Phoebe as exercising leadership with the church at Cenchreae and as one 'active in preaching and teaching', and he most definitely commended her to the Roman church in this capacity.

Order in the Corinthian Church

Certainly in the past and sometimes even today, Christians are taught that the place of women in the church is to be silent. This teaching is found in [1 Corinthians 14:33–35](#), and the passage does need careful analysis, for if interpreted literally it prevents women not only from teaching or preaching but also from singing and making prayer responses. In addition it appears to make Paul contradict himself for in [1 Corinthians 11:5](#) Paul explicitly speaks about women praying and prophesying in the church.

It has been well suggested by many able scholars that Paul in this section of his epistle is responding to difficulties of practice in the church at Corinth which were referred to him for his help. One of the problems concerned those who spoke in tongues often without interpretation and apparently sometimes together. They were advised to speak with an interpreter and in turn. The problem with the women can only be guessed at by the context, but it would appear from the statement 'if they would learn anything let them ask their husbands at home' that they were calling out and asking questions to gain understanding. Women's lack of education generally in those days would mean that such interruptions and questions were at a much lower level of understanding than that of the majority of men. Consequently the general edification would be interrupted and the practice was causing disorder in the congregation. Paul's solution was that women should not ask questions in the church but should seek understanding or clarification at home as was most certainly the pattern in society around and in the synagogues.

This is quite obviously a situation and solution true for the culture of the time in which it is written. Many conservative scholars today recognize that some statements in the Scripture are, to use John Stott's term, 'culturally dated'. Examples of such teaching are Jesus' command that we 'wash one another's feet' and Paul's injunction that women must cover their heads when praying or prophesying, or that they should refrain from wearing 'gold or pearls or costly attire'. Few [p. 25](#) Christians seem to believe these instructions are applicable literally today and this, I contend, applies also to the question of women being silent in the church. Women in Paul's times, who were gifted to do so, prayed and preached (prophesied), they sang hymns and no doubt read the Scriptures. They were not

silent. And today, I believe, they need not be silent. Nevertheless it must be said that the change in the cultural situation whereby women in present-day society have equality of position with men, does not mean that women (or men for that matter) have the right to be disorderly or bring about confusion in a meeting of the congregation. Women and men both have the responsibility to respect and defer to those who at the time, under God, exercise leadership and give ministry. This I believe is the eternal principle underlying this teaching.

Instruction to Timothy

One of the strongest bans against women's participation in the church relates to the situation of women giving teaching. The instructions concerning this appear superficially very clear in [1 Timothy 2:12](#) 'I permit not a woman to teach nor to have authority over men', but when one delves beneath the surface and looks at the context and surrounding verses several problems arise. These have been expounded by abler pens than mine but it is worthwhile to note them.

(1) If the surface meaning is taken as applying to women in all places for all time, this passage becomes the only text in the whole Bible which would definitely appear to forbid women from teaching or leading in a congregation. As such it appears contrary to practice in the New Testament church and contrary to other parts of Paul's teaching. The eminent New Testament scholar, Oscar Cullman, reminds us: 'the fountain head of all false Biblical interpretation and all heresy is invariably the isolation and absolutising of one single passage'.

(2) The surrounding justification for the prohibition is drawn from the creation story and the statements concerning childbirth and salvation. The difficulties of seeing clearly what is meant here are well known and it is true that parts of the passage can be understood in more than one way. When difficulties such as this exist, Christians have a duty not to interpret the disputed passage so that it conflicts with Paul's numerous positive statements about women and their ministry.

(3) When one looks at the original statements, the first clause is interpreted by the second: 'A woman is not to teach: not to have authority over men'. That is, the teaching is a special kind of teaching in which the idea of authority is embedded. The actual word used for [p.26](#) 'authority' can be translated 'supreme control'. It does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament and is the strongest word that could be chosen. It literally means 'to play the tyrant or despot'. This word tells us the sort of teaching that Paul was prohibiting. It is not the regular teaching of received Scriptural doctrine but teaching which is given as if the teacher had 'supreme authority'. It is interesting to note an historical situation of the time which recent research has uncovered. There were in existence some women who claimed to receive direct revelations from God upon particular matters. They therefore taught not under the authority of the Scriptures, not under the authority of the apostles or recognized leaders, but set themselves above all these. Such a practice by such women was condemned. In similar fashion Paul, when writing to Titus, denounces 'insubordinate men' who were proclaiming false teaching and says 'they must be silenced ... they have no right to teach' ([Titus 1:10-11](#)).

Women, therefore, like men, are prohibited from teaching outside the recognized authority, but conversely, their right to teach under authority, if God gives them this gift, must be allowed. To do otherwise is to set Scripture in conflict with Scripture.

God's church today needs women—to make the tea and butter the scones, yes—but also to teach and lead and worship under the authority of Holy Scripture and as guided by the Holy Spirit. That women of the past have not been able always to exercise their God-given gifts in the service of His church is a sad commentary upon the way in which the

church has at times conformed, even perhaps unconsciously, to the culture surrounding it. If Christians, both women and men, are sincerely seeking God's mind on this question and not relying on tradition, then they would again be seen as doing God's work of bringing light and liberty and harmony, and freeing from the shackles of sin.

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I Will Build My Church Reflections on the Wheaton '83 Conference on the Nature and Mission of the Church

William Cook

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BACKGROUND

As is the case in many conferences, Wheaton '83 took its name from the Wheaton (Illinois) College campus and the adjoining Billy Graham Centre where it took place. Perhaps it marked a first among modern Evangelical conferences. Convened by the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship, its purpose was to join for creative interaction and critical reflection on Evangelicalism's three contemporary missiological streams. Evangelicalism has been dominated largely by a Western—and U.S.—worldview. Still these streams had been more or less represented at three previous international conferences: Pattaya, 1980 ('How Shall They Hear?'); Edinburgh 1980 ('A Church for Every People by the Year 2000'); and Grand Rapids, 1982 (Consultation on the 'Relation between Evangelism and Social Responsibility' [CRESR]).

ORGANIZATION

Meeting from June 20 to July 7, Wheaton '83 was billed as three consultations rolled into one. Each had its own converters, staff, materials, methodology and goals united by an overall theme. The proximity of the three mini-conferences—or 'tracks'—and their frequent mixing in plenaries and Bible studies on Ephesians, made it more like one conference with three sub-themes. In this, Wheaton '83 superficially resembled the structure of the WCC's Vancouver meeting. Nonetheless, each mini-consultation formed its own identity, followed its own dynamics and concluded in different ways.

Wheaton '83 was intentionally a small affair, as world-wide Christian gatherings go these days. Operating with a limited budget and intent on giving maximum opportunity for dialogue, the staff of 30 resolutely permitted only 320 participants. In addition, 17 journalists covered the conference. Though few women and young people took part, no