

Women Priests?

The Bible answer to the current debate

PROMINENT among the many changes in society that have taken place in the modern world has been the increasing number of women taking on jobs that were previously the sole domain of men. There are women in most of the major professions; women doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Women can be found in important positions in industry and commerce, and running large companies. Women are involved in politics, and a number of countries have a woman as their head of government. With this emphasis on equality of opportunity in so many spheres of life have come calls for the greater involvement of women in the religious world, specifically to take up a place alongside men as priests.

This suggestion, though warmly welcomed in some quarters, has roused strong and passionate feelings. The adherents of widely differing views staunchly defend them by stating that theirs is the only position that can be tolerated. But this only serves to provide greater confusion. Who is right? Those who say it is wrong for women to act as priests, or those who say it is only prejudice that is keeping them out of these positions? What makes the problem even worse is that churchmen themselves cannot agree. They all claim to speak authoritatively, yet they cannot come to a common view, or even accept a common basis from which a position can be determined. If there is such disagreement in the ranks of churchmen, no wonder so many people feel perplexed and bewildered by the subject and become disillusioned with religion altogether. Where can the real answer be found? Is there a voice of authority we can listen to?

A source of authority

The Bible deals with religious matters, and is the only source of Christian knowledge. It is the written word of God and provides details of how men and women should act in order to be pleasing in His sight. If we look to God's word to provide the answer to this perplexing problem we know that it will be authoritative. Although some churchmen have used Bible teaching in support of their views, very few have claimed to rest them solely upon it. Significantly, the Bible has not been widely quoted in recent debates about who can be priests. It is commonly believed that the church has the authority to make new rules, not necessarily consistent with scripture. Some church leaders claim that the Holy Spirit is an active force in the modern church and is leading us to a new appreciation of aspects of life not foreseen when the Bible was being written. The difficulty arises when *every* churchman, whatever position he holds regarding the possibility of women being priests, uses the alleged working of the Holy Spirit within the church to support his particular point of view.

Can the Holy Spirit say one thing to one man and something completely different to another? The Bible itself was produced through the agency of the Holy Spirit, for men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Peter 1:21). Can the Spirit which produced the Bible reveal one teaching upon this subject, and yet give a different message to someone who then claims to speak on God's behalf? This would be confusion worse confounded! Yet God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). He has declared a simple rule to test the pronouncements of men who say they are speaking for Him. Through the prophet Isaiah, He said, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (8:20, AV).

Put simply, this means that there is only one authoritative source of information on matters relating to God and salvation. The Bible, God's revealed word, is as able to guide His people today as it was when it was first written. Furthermore, His message is simple, clear and logical. Anyone can understand it, so long as the Bible is approached genuinely with a desire to learn what it teaches.

The organisation of the church

After the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, his apostles were given the task of continuing his mission by preaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God and establishing congregations of believers in different places. Quite soon, and as numbers began to grow, it was necessary to give advice on how these groups should organise themselves and run their affairs without the need for constant visits from the apostles.

If God intended the followers of Christ to appoint priests to rule and guide his church, we should expect to find instructions about this in some of the New Testament letters. Specifically, if there needs to be a distinction between believers, as there is between the priesthood and the lay members in most churches, this would have been foreseen and explained by the apostles. They had the Holy Spirit gifts to use for the purpose of establishing the early believers in the Christian faith and were therefore able to speak and write with authority.

But we find no such advice in the Bible. Instead, the Christian church is described as a body, made up of separate individuals each bringing his or her own unique talents to provide for the well-being of the whole community. No task can be assumed to be pre-eminent; indeed the humblest tasks can have an importance completely out of proportion to their content. God ordained it this way, "that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Corinthians 12:25).

There were, of course, to be different jobs for different people, but the prime objective for all is that of service to the whole community of believers to bring honour to God's Name. Even the "head" of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ, said: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27), and set an example for all his followers to apply in their own lives.

Even though some of the specific tasks in the community's organisation are mentioned in the apostles' writings (bishops, deacons, elders, etc.), there is no indication that the believers who fill these roles have any right to assume that the work they do marks them out as different from or superior to their fellows. Every believer has to "work out (his) own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). He can only do this by a devotion to what God has revealed, attempting to mould his life in conformity to these divine principles.

One mediator

It is commonly believed that priests are able to act on behalf of God, speaking for Him and for Christ, and mediating on the believers' behalf. But the Bible clearly declares that: "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:5,6). All true believers can approach the Father through him. The Bible does not recognise the need, or make provision for a human priest to intercede on the behalf of others. The old Jewish priesthood was no longer needed once Jesus had offered "once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous" (Hebrews 10:10).

The Apostle Paul expressed God's desire that everybody should benefit from this salvation, made possible through the work of Christ:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectable in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

God wishes all men to be saved. This does not of course mean that He is unconcerned with women! The word translated “men” twice in this passage really means “mankind” and encompasses both men and women. God wants all men and women to be saved. Paul had mentioned earlier when writing to the believers in Galatia that the effect of Christ's saving work has no barriers:

“In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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.” (Galatians 3:26-28)

In God's sight the country we are born in, the colour of our skin, the sort of job we do, or whether we are male or female, are all unimportant so far as the offer of salvation is concerned. This is what the phrase “Equal Opportunities” really means! God does not look on the outward appearance but on the heart, as He revealed to Samuel (1 Samuel 16:7). Any individual, regardless of background, can have hope of eternal life through faith and baptism into Christ.

Yet, though salvation is freely available to all, believers are still individuals with their own particular strengths and weaknesses. It is not God's objective to suppress these when His offer of salvation is accepted. Each believer has his own part to play in the service of God. Men and women, like the different parts in a body, have different responsibilities and functions within the congregation. These do not limit the freedom of opportunity for salvation — that position has already been fully accepted — but they do help to explain why men and women need saving, and how it will be accomplished. These different roles, it must be stressed, carry no idea of difference of spiritual status. The woman's role is not inferior to the man's, but it is different.

Different roles

It is the job of men, Paul wrote to Timothy, to lead congregational worship:

“I desire then that in every place (i.e. wherever there is a group of believers) the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling.” (1 Timothy 2:8)

Here the word “men” means just what it says; the males are to lead the prayers. It is worth noting that no further special qualifications are indicated. Not “some men”, attempting to distinguish them from others who cannot do this work, but “men” in general are to fulfil this function.

The woman's position is different. Her role in communal worship is more in the nature of offering support:

“Women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.” (verses 9-12)

This does not mean that women have nothing to do among the community of believers, or that they are somehow “second class” believers. We have already seen that there is no distinction so far as salvation is concerned, and we shall discover later that Paul anticipates this reaction to God’s commands and deals with it. But his comment about women keeping silence is often quoted as an inflammatory attack on the female sex. Paul, so his critics say, was being chauvinistic. They claim that such language is not fitting for our enlightened age where, in common with men, women expect totally equal treatment and opportunities.

Was Paul anti-women?

What exactly did Paul mean? Was he relegating women to the kitchen sink, as if they are fit only to bear and rear children, and prepare meals? This suggestion is refuted in his letter to another young convert, Titus. Paul explained how everyone has a part to play, old men and old women, young men and young women, servants and masters. He explained that older women, like the aged men, are “to be reverent in behaviour” *“they are to teach what is good”* (Titus 2:3). So, when he wrote to Timothy, Paul’s strictures on women teaching are meant to apply only in situations of communal worship. Paul says the same when writing to believers in Corinth: “Women should keep silence *in the churches*” (1 Corinthians 14:34). In every other aspect of life women believers have the same responsibility as their male counterparts to teach and to preach, both directly and by example. This sort of “reverent behaviour” by men *and* women will “adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour” (Titus 2:10). The commandments of God are not just to be accepted as some sort of philosophical statement. They have to be put into practice in the believer’s life if they are to fulfil their real purpose. Then, and only then, can they be seen in their true beauty.

If the apostle had left his comments at that point there would have been a command, without supporting reasons, for the different roles of men and women in the organisation of the communal life of believers. He therefore continued to explain that men are to lead communal worship and women are to remain quiet in the congregation, “for Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:13,14). By this simple statement he was reminding his readers of what happened in the Garden of Eden at the dawn of man’s history, and relating it to Christian worship. What is there about the Genesis record of Adam and Eve that can help to explain how believers should organise themselves today?

Folly in Eden

Adam had been given a commandment by God that only one tree in His wonderful garden was barred to him. All the others were available to provide food, “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Genesis 2:17). His companion Eve was, however, tempted to disobey: “she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate” (3:6). Eve sought personal advantage, and did not heed the message God gave through His angels.

When God spoke to her afterwards, He said: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (3:16). Eve was to suffer greatly for her folly. She was doomed to death and would always live in the shadow of the grave. Additionally, she and all womanhood would have pain in childbirth, bringing forth new life, but knowing in sorrow that each child that is born is bound to die of sickness, accident, or old age. Finally, because she had not listened to Adam, she was to be subject to him. This happened because she foolishly believed the serpent's lie: she was "deceived". As Paul himself said to Timothy: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Timothy 2:14).

All this sounds as if Adam, who also broke God's command by eating from the tree, got off scot-free. Nothing could be further from the truth. They each had responsibilities before God, and they both failed under that test. They both sinned; but Eve believed the serpent, while Adam knew the consequences when he ate from the tree. He knew what God had said, but he listened to his wife instead. God therefore said: "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree which is cursed is the ground which in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:17-19).

The Apostle Paul obviously had this incident firmly in his mind when he wrote to Timothy. It forms the background to all his advice regarding how Christian congregations are to be organised. If we look again at some of the things he wrote, they will now be seen in a clearer light: "I desire then that as the men should pray that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly - Let a woman *learn in silence* with all submissiveness - I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent" (1 Timothy 2:8-12).

Eden remembered

In communal worship, therefore, the lessons of Eden have to be carefully observed. In Eden the woman usurped God's authority which had been transmitted by the angels, then by man. Thereafter, and to remind men and women of what had happened, men were to take the lead in their joint approach before God. It does not matter whether men wish to or not, or whether some women are more capable than some men; these are not the considerations that should apply. Women are to do now what it would have been better if Eve had done then - to listen quietly, honouring the God who is able to give life to those who approach Him in humility and in the way He has decreed. Men today have to take the leading role in communal worship because of Adam's failure to do so in Eden. Adam "listened to the voice" of his wife instead of the voice of God, and so he and all his male descendants suffer the consequence. In Christ both women and men have to act in ways that clearly acknowledge the folly of their first parents.

We noted earlier that the apparent unfairness of all this was recognised by Paul. He appreciated that the arrangement looks as if it is penalising women, possibly even creating a barrier to their eventual salvation. He therefore completed this section of his letter to Timothy by saying:

"Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty." (verse 15)

What a strange thing to say! It sounds as if only those women who are mothers will be saved; or, possibly, that only believing women will be certain to survive the rigours of childbirth! Without appreciating the background in Genesis there would be no other obvious explanation for this verse. But we have seen that childbearing was one of the things affected for all women as a result of Eve's disobedience. Paul was referring to this, and answering the criticism he knew would be levelled against his teaching about the woman's role in the church. The record in Genesis emphasises the separate but complementary roles of man and woman. The man has a special responsibility to show spiritual leadership. The woman's role is found in the qualities which uniquely fit her for motherhood – care, compassion and selfless dedication. Providing she is maintaining a faithful spiritual life, then through the exercise of these qualities she is ensuring her own salvation – as well as assisting others to apply the same principles as guides in their lives.

Paul was declaring in a straightforward way that the provision God was making for the future organisation of believers was essential if the effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden are finally to be removed from their descendants. Men and women meet together to worship God and to thank Him for the gift of His Son, and the salvation made possible in him. By taking up their divinely appointed roles they declare that, like their first parents, they are disobedient and as deserving as they were of the punishment God introduced. By their demeanour before Him, however, they are also declaring that they believe He will ultimately redeem them from death, and from all the other consequences of the first sin.

Men should not be domineering

Lest male believers should think that they have been placed in a position to lord it over women, or to dominate them, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord – husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:21-25). He was pointing out that the male / female relationship should take as its example the love of Christ for the believers, and their reliance upon him in all things. This principle can be seen reflected in the arrangements for communal worship: the men are to reflect Christ, while the women reflect the response of all the believers.

In the Corinthian church, these things were being done, and they were organised as Paul had directed, but the reason for them was not fully understood:

"I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." (1 Corinthians 11:2,3)

Christ is the head of the body – his church. Human relationships within the church are therefore specially ordered to provide a constant reminder of God's gracious provision of a saviour for mankind from his sin, and of how that sin first occurred when the authority of God was forsaken. Men and women have their special part to play in declaring their belief in these things. Not to organise themselves as God has appointed is effectively to deny the truth of what it is all designed to teach.

Authority – on the head

In explaining this to the Corinthians, Paul added a further requirement for men and women in communal worship. They were already doing what he commanded Timothy: the men, and not the women, were leading the congregational worship. But it would help the women believers if they could do something positive to show their understanding of these commands. This is what was commanded:

“Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonours her head. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. That is why a woman ought to have a veil (Greek, authority) on her head, because of the angels.” (1 Corinthians 11:4,5,7,10)

It all seems a very strange provision until we realise (and as the Greek of verse 10 indicates) that it is an expression of how to respond to God’s ultimate authority, the authority that was forsaken by Adam and Eve in Eden. The man, reflecting Christ, is to appear before God bareheaded. To do otherwise would discredit his “head”, which is Christ. By contrast, the woman is to appear with her head covered. Her “head” is the man (see verse 3). If she was to appear uncovered she would be exposing not only herself to disgrace, but also the male believers. The only way both men and women can show that they are under the authority of God and Christ is to comply with this command – the man appearing bareheaded, and the woman with her head covered, when they approach before God to worship Him. The angels do not seek to usurp their position as God’s servants, so nor should men or women.

If these teachings are understood, how can the suggestion that women should take more of a leading role in communal worship be sustained? To do so would deny the whole process of salvation graciously provided by God for fallen mankind.

A kingdom – and priests!

The sacrifice of Christ ensures for faithful believers a place in his kingdom, to be established on the earth when he returns. The life of service for believers today is probationary. In His wisdom and mercy, God has provided for men and women the circumstances that will teach them of the glories of the future age – if they respond to them properly. There is no distinction of opportunity now between males and females, and in the kingdom the different roles will no longer be necessary. The lessons they are designed to teach will either have been learned, to the believers’ benefit, or forsaken, to their shame. Jesus taught about this when he said: “Those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage – they are equal to angels” (Luke 20:35,36).

At his return, the work of Christ will be seen in all the earth. Those redeemed by his sacrifice and judged to be his faithful servants will share with him in bringing the world into a full knowledge of God’s ways: “They shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:6). The Apostle Peter spoke in the same way of what lies in store for those who “love his (Christ’s) appearing”. They are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

What a wonderful promise! Let us therefore, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, *male or female*, honour God’s commands and through Christ “continually offer up a sacrifice of

praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name and recognise His supreme authority (Hebrews 13:15).

By Michael Ashton

Most Bible quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version

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