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WOMAN MINISTER



A study on women in ministry

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Scripture: Romans 16:1-2

This week I have received two letters from puzzled and disappointed men, over my promotion of women in the leadership of the church. Both have stated that for many years they have appreciated my scriptural stance on many matters, but feel that in the matter of women in leadership I have moved from the scriptures:

“Your doctrine as preached to the Baptist ladies at their convention, seems to reek of the ‘feminist theology’ currently sweeping through the churches. This philosophy is cleverly linked with the homosexual drive to put themselves in the pulpit. You are quoted in this Baptist journal that times are changing and that the church has to change with them. Is this what you think? Your understanding of the place for ministries for women in the church does not agree with that of God. It most definitely agrees with the wisdom of the world in relation to what women and some men think they should be doing in the church, but your scriptures and philosophies do not agree with the word of God,” says Mick Mulgrew of Maryborough, Queensland.

A 2GB listener writes:

“I praise God for your ministry and outspokenness against falling away type doctrine in the church today. However, for some reason, you have taken society’s thermometer for the role of women in the church. What has changed in the last 2000 years that women now have rights to equal partnership or headship in marriage or the church? Man’s headship is God’s will in marriage and the church. If you preach otherwise then your message is worthless, and the church offers nothing the world can’t offer with its humanistic philosophies,” says Phil Neal of Lane Cove.

Wesley Mission also has women ministers, women staff, women elders, women stewards. Most elders and parish counsellors and most of our one thousand five hundred employed staff are women. In leadership we have women in about the same proportion as the early church—90 leaders are mentioned by name in the New Testament and 20 are women. It is because of the scriptures I take my stand, not in spite of them.

THE MINISTRY OF PHOEBE

In Romans 16 Paul greets twenty-six people by name, as well as several unnamed; and the churches that were meeting in homes. He closed with greetings from nine believers who were with him in Corinth when he wrote the letter. Tonight I will consider the first of these: Paul’s commendation of Phoebe.

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me” (Romans 16:1-2).

It seems likely that Phoebe was the person entrusted with the task of taking the letter to Rome, for a commendation of someone not with the letter normally refers to a

future arrival (cf. 1 Cor. 16:10; Col. 4:10). Christians were noted for their hospitality and such a commendation introduced the bearer.

Phoebe is called our sister, a normal description of a female believer; believers were members of the family of God. She was also “a servant of the church in Cenchrea.” Paul’s word translated here as “servant”, is the word for “deacon” which is translated as such in his letter to the Philippians (1:1). Paul describes Phoebe as a deacon of the church at Cenchrea. The word is the feminine of deacon, so some translations call her, “a deaconess”, although the word “deaconess” is not found until much later. There were women in the early church who served by visiting the sick, assisting the young women, and helping the poor. Phoebe was, whatever the title, an office-bearer in the Church.

Social conditions then required female church workers to assist in such matters as the baptism of women or anything that meant contact with women’s quarters in homes. She was an official in the same way that this word is used of elders, bishops and ministers. The word used of her is the same word Paul used of himself and others in ministry who preached Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:5): “I Paul, was made a minister” (Col 1:23).

Phoebe is called a deacon, and is also called by the same word translated of men as “minister”. She came from Cenchrea, which was the port of Corinth and she was probably won to Christ during Paul’s year and a half ministry in Corinth.

The Romans were “to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints” which means the kind of welcome that is most fitting. “To give her any help she may need” means to stand by her in whatever matter she has need. Paul anticipated that she would need assistance in Rome and he expected the Romans to help her.

For Paul goes on to make it clear that Phoebe was someone special. She had helped many people, himself included. Phoebe had been a helper or “protectress” of himself and other Christians. This word he uses is the feminine of a word used like the Latin *patronus* for the legal representative of the foreigner. In Jewish communities it meant the legal representative or wealthy patron. Phoebe somehow was the legal protector of the Christians at Cenchrea. In the Old Testament this noun is used of officials in charge of the work of the King (1 Chron 29:6) and of chief officers “who ruled over the people” (2 Chron 8:10). In its verb form the word means “to be at the head of, to rule, to direct” and it is used of those who “rule” in the church (Rom 12:8, 1 Thess 5:12, 1 Tim 5:17). Phoebe was exercising a ministry of leadership in the church at Cenchrea. Paul may have used it figuratively, but even so it points to an important person. It was unlikely that a woman would travel alone and probably Phoebe travelled with a retinue of servants, and this, too, points to a woman of means. Dr Leon Morris, one of the world’s greatest commentators on Romans says: “There were not many wealthy people in the church of the day, but it seems that Phoebe was one of them” (*Romans* Eerdmans, 1988).

Phoebe was a woman in the early church holding a position of leadership, rulership and ministry, who used her influence to help Paul. But Phoebe is only the first of a dozen mentioned in this chapter. Let us now turn to look at the women in the first century church.

The Early Church and the Ministry of Women

At Pentecost men and women, filled with the Spirit, bore witness to Christ. Joel's prophecy was fulfilled: "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy". Prophecy was equated with preaching, and at Pentecost, both sons and daughters preached the Word by the Spirit's power!

Luke says the assembly in the Upper Room prior to Pentecost included "the women" (Acts 1:14) and that they were among those empowered by the Spirit who proclaimed "the wonderful works of God" (2:11). The early Church gave women a leadership position from its very inception. The role of women is then seen through The Acts of the Apostles in Dorcas (9:32-42), Lydia (16:14-15, 25-34), Priscilla, who "explained the way of God more adequately" (18:26), and the four preaching daughters of Philip the Evangelist (21:9-10).

Virtually all of the house-churches mentioned in Acts are identified with a woman, implying that she was the "head" of that household. There was a congregation in Lydia's home (16:14-15, 40), Mark's mother's home (12:12), and Nymphia's home (Colossians 4:15).

Paul and the Ministry of Women

People who write letters to the papers advocating women in ministry generally view Paul as a male chauvinist. They are totally wrong. Paul was an advocate of women's liberation in the context of a chauvinistic culture. He affirms that in Christ "there is neither male nor female" (Gal 3:26-28) and demonstrates it in his treatment of women.

Our Lord Jesus lifted women to the highest level in the ancient world. He spoke to women as people of intelligence, and treated them as responsible leaders even encouraging as the first evangelist a converted woman. His example was followed by Paul who was the greatest emancipator in the religious world. He constantly encouraged and equipped women for ministry. We know the names of twenty women who worked with him.

Apart from Phoebe, Paul speaks of Priscilla and Aquila as fellow-workers, the term he uses when speaking of men who established churches and spread of the Gospel such as Timothy and Titus (Rom 16:21; 1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25). Priscilla is mentioned six times. With her husband Aquila, she ministered in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus. She is usually mentioned first as if leader. She corrected a famous preacher from Egypt, Apollos, by teaching him the fullness of the Gospel. They also led a house church in each centre.

Paul speaks of women who "worked hard with him" in the work of the Gospel (Rom 16:6,12; Phil 4:3). Mary and Persis, and the twins, Tryphena and Tryphosa, (whose names mean Dainty and Delicate) were women in the church at Rome whom Paul described as working "very hard in the Lord". At Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, were described as "fellow workers" alongside Paul and Clement, a title he reserved for younger ministers like Timothy, Epaphroditus, Titus, Luke, Demas, Philemon and Aristarcus, all being teachers and pastors. What work? The most common work was evangelism and pastoral care. Junia, who with Andronicus (probably her husband), were "relatives who have been

in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Rom 16:7). They were outstanding as Apostles, the rare term given to the early authorised missionaries. All the early Church writers believed Junia was a woman, but in the 13th Century one scholar indicated that because she was an Apostle, she must have been a man with a woman’s name. That comment is repeated by people opposed to the leadership of women today, but no early writer in the first thirteen hundred years believed it.

Paul also greeted by name many others, some of whom had believers with them in their homes, possibly being the overseer or elder to a group of Christians in a home church, as did Nympha who had a church in her house at Colossae. Claudia was serving with other believers, as was Apphia, possibly as evangelists. Chloe’s household in Corinth was well enough known to the Christians in Ephesus to recognise her leadership.

Paul endorses the ministry of those who “pray or prophesy” in church (1 Cor 11:2-16). In many churches the first converts were women. Damaris, a woman of some significance, was converted in Athens. The Church was started at Philippi following the conversion of Lydia, a business woman who worshipped God with other women by a river side. She provided hospitality in her home to the missionaries, which became the centre for the new church following the baptism of her whole household. She was a wealthy business woman trading in expensive cloth from Turkey, and later, the believers in Philippi sent the imprisoned Paul money and provisions. The four daughters of Philip, at Caesarea, like their father who had evangelised the Ethiopian on the Gaza Road, became evangelists prophesying, the word meaning “preaching”.

Paul told the Church in Corinth not to argue but to come to some agreement a “woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered”. That comment led to countless discussions in earlier times about women wearing hats in church and keeping their hair uncut. Most have missed the main point: it was not a restriction upon what worshippers should wear, but what women who were leading in prayers and preaching should wear! (1 Cor. 11:1-16). Some were regarded as not dressing modestly, but they were women who were leading worship, praying and proclaiming Christ in public.

There are two problem passages in Paul. One had to do with the troublesome church in Corinth, which saw constant argument, drunkenness and immorality. Paul told the women there to keep silent in church, be submissive and ask their husbands at home as the Jewish Law required of them (1 Cor 14:33-35). That was the Jewish custom. I assume that in Jerusalem, he would also take that view. But in all others churches Rome, Athens, Thessalonica, Berea, Cenchrea, Philippi, Ephesus, Colossae, Lystra, Derbe and so on, there were no restriction but many examples of positive encouragement to women. The command that women “keep silence” (1 Cor 14:33-35) cannot logically be applied to public prayer or prophecy when women gave leadership in this church, but rather to bad behaviour such as chatting during worship.

The second was his instruction to Timothy: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” (1 Tim 2:11-12). Many Christians see this as a prohibition against the public ministry of women. I can only suggest that as G. C. Berkouwer suggests, some instructions are “time bound”, or, to use John Stott’s phrase, “culturally dated” such as the practise of footwashing and of women wearing long hair. There were specific

problems in the Church when Paul wrote to Timothy which warranted such stringent measures which no longer apply today.

Paul liberated women into leadership roles as no other person in the ancient world except our Lord Jesus. Women are “made in the image of God” (Gen 1:27); they are called to be part of God’s “royal priesthood” through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:9); they are given an honoured place in the ministries of our Lord, the Apostle Paul, and the Early Church. They are recipients, along with men, of the gift of the Spirit and the prophetic ministry (Acts 2:17,18). Thus, in asking whether or not a woman can be set apart for ministry and leadership in the Church, the answer must be based on the principle set forth by Paul: “For in Christ there cannot be any distinction between male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26,27).

Much of the hostility against women in position of leadership in the church today is due to our Western culture. Paul is far ahead of those modern believers. Some churches still limit women to the traditional roles of silence, subjection and submission where women arrange flowers, serve tea and attend prayer meetings. The largest Church in the world, in Korea, has over 10,000 women pastors, working as elders in voluntary pastoral leadership positions, visiting people, leading prayer meetings and house witnessing. Jesus Christ calls us all to follow Him, to grow in faith, to develop spiritual gifts and use them in the growth of His church. Jesus still needs women to serve His cause. Will you believe and commit your life to Him?