

WOMEN IN MINISTRY
Some Hermeneutical Reflections
David W. Kendall

Introduction

Almost everyone believes and allows women to be in ministry. Even those who will disagree with my views on the matter do, in fact, recognize not only the privilege but duty of women to be in ministry (where would the church be if throughout history women had **not** served in nearly every form of ministry!) The first question is: what limitations have been placed on the leadership of women in ministry and why? The second question is: are these limitations general and universal or specific and contextual? I will return to these questions at the conclusion of this paper.

How We Treat The Bible

I begin with several assumptions I make about the Bible. First, the Bible is the Word of God and is therefore the final authority for Christian believing and living. The Bible is not so much a single book as it is a library of books—different kinds of literature, written over long periods of time, for different life settings of the people of God. Despite all these differences, however, we believe the Bible is unified in its witness to the one true God and reveals His plan for the world and humanity.

These assumptions are critical to our discussion. Let me explain. It is not enough to find a verse or passage that teaches something and accept that as the only or the most important word on the subject. We must rather seek to get a sense of the flow of Scripture, a general sense of what God is doing in history that we gather from the whole Bible.

One important implication of this approach is that we cannot understand all parts of the Bible as equal in value on a given subject. For example, in the OT there was clear allowance for a man to marry more than one wife. Yet, in a discussion of marriage we would and should hesitate to take an OT passage reflecting that practice and treat it in the same way we treat Paul's discussion of marriage in Ephesians. Instead, we must see how specific passages in the Bible relate to the whole sweep of Scriptural truth.

Another important implication of these assumptions is that when there are verses or passages that are unclear or difficult, or that seem to contradict other passages, we must set what is unclear or difficult into the whole Biblical story and interpret the unclear by what is clear. The importance of these assumptions will be clear as we proceed.

The Larger Picture of Creation and Redemption

Let me put the question of women in ministry against the broader background of God's work in creation and redemption. What did God intend in the original creation? According to Genesis 1, when God created human beings, male and female, both of them bore his image, both of them were called to be fruitful and multiply (something impossible for each alone), and both were called to exercise dominion or stewardship in the world (God said, "let **them** have dominion," 1:26). There is no differentiation as to roles in the first creation account. Both together will take care of the world God created just as both together will multiply and fill the earth with their kind.

The same conclusion rises out of the second creation account in Genesis 2. There God creates the man first and then declares that it is “not good” for the man to be alone (2:18). Read in light of chapter 1, with its frequent reports that God saw what he had made and judged it to be good, this statement that the man alone was **not** good is especially significant. Not good for what? In light of chapter 1, man alone could not fulfill the role God assigned to human beings. Only **together** could they multiply and only **together** could they adequately care for the world. Accordingly, God puts the man to sleep and makes a partner for him—a full partner who completes him and whose partnership makes it possible for God’s calling on humanity to be accepted and accomplished. Originally, the man and the woman are full partners—equal not only in dignity, but in responsibility.

What did human sin do to God’s original plan? In short, all of the relationships God designed become corrupt, paradise was lost, and all hell broke loose. Specifically, we note the impact of sin on the relations and roles of the man and the woman. One verse especially tells the story: Gen. 3:16. The Lord says to the woman, “I will greatly multiply your pain in child bearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” This post-sin picture depicts a radically different human situation. Once they were partners, both responsible for carrying out God’s mandate, both expected to rule over God’s creation. Now, in the wake of sin, she looks primarily to her husband and not to God; while he rules over her as he does the rest of the animal world. Later in chapter 3 we read that Adam named his wife as he had done with all the other animals (3:20).

Human sin corrupted God’s original plan for their relationship—now there’s a boss, a Lord, and now there is an underling to be ruled. From the perspective of original creation, the notion that there is a hierarchy with man above woman, no matter how well qualified, owes more to sin than God’s design.

What, then, has God done about sin and its consequences? In the Genesis account we have a hint, often called the first good news. The serpent will bruise the heel of the woman’s seed, but in the end the serpent gets it in the head (3:15). And, so he has!

Clearly, God intends to work full salvation from sin and all of its consequences. While some of those consequences may well plague us until the Kingdom comes fully, **in principle** and in fact where sin has broken creation’s design, grace mends and restores it. According to Paul, Christ redeems us from the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13), and in that context the curse of the Law certainly includes the brokenness that sin has brought to every area of human life.

The question of women in ministry must be answered against the backdrop of this larger story of creation and redemption. If all we had to go on was the creation accounts, there would be no issue, for nothing in those accounts suggests any limitations on what a woman might do in obedience to God’s call. Of course, after sin enters the picture nothing is as God intended. After sin, all sorts of limitations hassle both the man and the woman. But we dare not regard these limitations as normative, since God has acted to do away with sin and destroy the works of the devil.

If this view is correct we should expect to see evidence in the biblical story that God is at work to reverse the consequences of sin with regard to

women. In fact, that is precisely what we find. Throughout the history of God's saving activity in the Bible **God** calls and empowers notable women to lead His people. Miriam is a prophetess and is classed with Moses and Aaron by Micah (Mi. 6:4). Deborah was a prophetess and a judge. She performed the same duties as the men who judged Israel, even leading the army to victory in battle (Judges 4:4). Huldah and Noadiah also were prophetesses (2 Kgs. 22:14; Nahum 6:14).

These exceptional instances of women playing important ministry/ leadership roles among God's people certainly foreshadow the Kingdom Jesus and the Spirit inaugurated in the first century. Joel promised a new age where young and old as well as male and female would receive God's Spirit (Joel 2:28-29). Specifically it is said that they will **prophesy**—that is, proclaim the good news of new life in Jesus. And so it began on the day of Pentecost.

Yet the full inclusion of women on that day came as no novelty of grace. Jesus had given extraordinary place to women during his ministry. The Samaritan woman, who quickly moved from new convert to village evangelist (Jn. 4); the preference for Mary's learning at Jesus' feet (the traditional place of male students) over Martha's work in the kitchen (the traditional place of the female); the blessing pronounced on the one who hears and obeys Jesus' word as Jesus' new family; the role of Joanna and other women disciples in supporting Jesus' ministry; and the post-resurrection role of women—all these bear striking testimony to the dignity of women and their significant roles among the earliest disciples of Jesus.

Indeed, in the early church of Pauline and non-Pauline origin we see much evidence that women participated in ministry and leadership functions along side of men. Paul's declaration that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, . . . slave nor free, . . . male nor female, for you are all one in Christ," interpreted in its context suggests that racial, social, economic, cultural, political characteristics no longer determine either a person's status or function in the body of Christ. Now in Christ Gentiles, slaves, and women are full participants in the Body. And, as Paul elsewhere teaches, it is God who constitutes Christ's Body, calling various ones to do various things, as He wills (1 Cor. 12:11).

When we look at the NT for indications of how God did, in fact, put together the Body of Christ in the first century world, we find women positioned in most of the places we find men, including as apostles (Junia, Rom. 16:7), as prophets (Acts 2; 1 Cor. 11:5), and as renowned co-workers of Paul (e.g., Priscilla, Euodia, Syntyche, Rom. 16; Phil. 4:1).

The Gospel transformation of persons and their social reality, however, takes place in a fallen and broken world, a world profoundly shaped by the consequences of sin. Accordingly, we also see plenty of evidence of unredeemed social reality still present in the NT era and in the church. The most glaring example of this would have to be the continuing presence of slavery as a social institution. But another example of social reality not yet entirely transformed may be seen in what *appears* to be the subordination of women and church life still largely dominated by men.

But the word "appears" is a critical word. For God's way is to subvert sinful social reality through grace, to overthrow unjust structures from within the system, rather than simply to blow the system away. Precisely that was the approach of the early church to slavery. Philemon could be read as an

endorsement of slavery (and it **has**). Yet, if Philemon does what Paul urges him to do, it would signal the virtual end of slavery as the ancient world knew it—at least within the Christian community.

Similarly, Paul can teach on the respective roles of husbands and wives in Ephesians and Colossians. What he says can be read as an endorsement of a hierarchical arrangement in the home—husband at the top, wife subordinate. This arrangement was the common household structure in the ancient, pagan world. Yet, if husbands and wives will read the whole of Ephesians and Colossians and allow all that Paul says to shape their lives, their relationship will not conform to that ancient social structure. Jesus simply turned everything upside down—to be head as He was head will most often mean just the opposite of what it meant in the ancient world. To give only one example, to follow Jesus' example of headship leads the husband to empty himself (Phil. 2:5), which looks very much like subordination, not headship!

When talk of male headship is abstracted from the premiere model Jesus offers, at its best it leads to a soft but still unredeemed model practiced by good people. But when headship takes its cue from Jesus—the Lord who serves, the master who washed feet, the king crowned with thorns and dying on a cross—the model of headship itself is called into question. That is, Jesus actual way of life breaks the old social arrangements and calls us to altogether new relationships.

Difficult Passages

I've tried to sketch a flow of God's saving work rooted in creation and intended to restore the brokenness caused by sin as the background for understanding the specific issues related to women in ministry. Against that background, the **general** flow of God's work leads us to expect the full inclusion of women in the life and ministry of the church. And as we have seen, the NT confirms this general flow.

There are however, at least two texts that would seem to run exactly counter to this flow. Here the observations I made at the beginning become critical for proper interpretation.

These specific texts in question—Paul's assertion that women are to be silent in church and never teach or hold authority over men, and that this represents the practice in all of his churches (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-12)—when taken at face value and literally, suggest practices that contradict the whole flow of biblical revelation. The flow is quite clear, whereas the precise meanings of these texts are disputed. On principle, we should defer to the whole flow of revelation we have seen, rather than pin our practices on two passages that all would agree are difficult.

It is beyond the scope of this brief paper to explore these texts. Most critical commentaries offer analyses of the relevant historical, cultural, and social contexts in which Paul wrote. In each text, Paul most likely seeks to correct abuses, not lay down universal principles limiting the full participation of women in the life and ministry of the church.

I return to the questions with which I began. The limitations that have been placed on women in ministry do not trace back to God's intent, as we see it in either the original creation or the recreation through Christ. The limitations on women, particularly their subordination, traces back to the consequences of sin. Unfortunately, through its history the church has often failed to see this, and has embraced unregenerate social structures, such as

slavery and the racism it encourages, and also the continuing models of male priority over females, at least in terms of leadership if not in other terms as well. I conclude that none of the limitations historically imposed upon women in ministry are universal and necessarily binding upon the church.