

CHAPTER III THE ROLE OF WOMEN

A. Beginning Thoughts

Before we begin this study in detail, we must remind ourselves of certain key principles:

1. **Grace extends to this area too.** A Christian will not be lost if he or she in good conscience violates God's will regarding women. Such a Christian will be wrong, will have sinned—and will be forgiven. Nowhere does the Bible say that God will not forgive or will apply a stricter standard in this area.

2. **The biases we discussed earlier, being the biases that we all have, are particularly strong in this area.** The relationship of men and women is very, very strongly influenced by culture, and it is very hard to avoid reading popular culture into our interpretation of the Bible.

I remember reading an article first published in the *Gospel Advocate*¹³ in the early part of this century written during the Women's Suffrage Movement. The author was convinced that it would be sin for a woman to vote, because submissive women should not be allowed to decide things that may affect men. He then pointed out that a submissive wife would have to vote as her husband voted, and therefore giving the women the vote would only double the votes received by each candidate, but could never change the outcome! When was the last time you heard a sermon against women voting? Or instructing women to vote as their husbands vote? Has the Bible changed, or our culture?

Similarly, when I was a child the Bible taught that women must wear hats in church. Now it no longer does. Did the Bible change, or did we? Did we change due to closer Bible study, or due to a change in popular fashions? If our reading of the Bible in the 1950's was influenced by the latest fashions from Paris, why should we suppose that we are now immune from such influences?

3. However, **the scriptures are true without regard to culture, and the truths in them can be ascertained.** Our difficulty is often not the vagueness of the scriptures, but the fact that we often try to find answers to problems that are not really problems. If we read the Bible looking for the limit on what women can do, we have *assumed* that there is such a limit! If we read the Bible looking for the rules on how to

¹³ Until recently, the leading publication and doctrinal standard-bearer for the southeastern United States Churches of Christ.

BURIED TALENTS

conduct a Sunday morning assembly, how to handle church funds, or what institutions a church may support, we have *assumed* that there are such rules. Do I deny that such rules exist? The answer is that I have no opinion at all—until I read the scriptures. The life of a Christian presents enough problems without us inventing new ones of our own. Let's please be careful not to assume that there are rules and then go looking for them. The rules that matter are indeed discussed in the Bible, and they are discussed plainly enough. If we can't find a clear answer to the doctrinal problem, maybe—just maybe—there isn't a problem.

4. **Whatever the Bible teaches about the role of women is a part of the doctrine of grace—and not an exception to grace.** If what we believe about women contradicts the Bible's teaching on grace, our beliefs about women are wrong. We should find that the Bible's teachings on women are a natural, spiritual consequence of God's good gift of grace.

5. **Whatever the Bible teaches about the role of women is a natural consequence of the perfect law of love.** We must be able to derive our conclusions about women from "Love thy neighbor" (Matt. 29:39-40; Rom. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:13-14; James 2:8). It is not enough to claim that our conclusions are consistent with "Love thy neighbor," rather they must *derive* from the command to love. Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets "hang" from the command to love. Paul says that nothing else matters (Gal. 5:6). We cannot add to the Bible.

6. **Whatever the Bible teaches about the role of women is a natural consequence of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is mentioned hundreds of times in the New Testament. Paul, especially, repeatedly refers to the Spirit as the basis on many of his teachings. The Bible's doctrine of women cannot contradict the doctrine of the Spirit.

B. Principles of Interpretation

While I would not wish to burden the reader with an essay on hermeneutics,¹⁴ we should pause briefly to reflect on just how we test one competing interpretation of scripture against another.

We have already stated the first rule of interpretation—**know your own biases** and avoid interpreting to satisfy them. It is far too easy to find a shallow, too-convenient argument that just happens to support what you want to believe and then persuade yourself that the argument is God's own truth.

Second, we must not take the most difficult passages, impose our preferred views on them, and then use our human conclusions to reinterpret (or just ignore) the plainer

¹⁴ Not the "new hermeneutics," for those readers who keep up with fashionable Church controversies.

passages that don't suit our prejudices. For a seeker of the truth, the path is clear. **Start with the basics**, meaning what the Bible says are the basics. And then work toward the more ambiguous passages.

It is easy to unconsciously reason in circles. For example, suppose that we read 1 Timothy 2:11-15 with our traditional church biases in mind to conclude that women cannot have authority over men. This passage bases its teachings on Genesis 2. We then turn to Genesis 2 and interpret it to say that women cannot have authority over men—basing our interpretation on 1 Timothy 2:11-15. We then turn back to 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and argue that our interpretation must be right because it is supported by our interpretation of Genesis 2!

To avoid this, we must first look at the scripture that is not so difficult. Does the Bible support our position from unambiguous passages interpreted without benefit of the difficult passages? **Or do the unambiguous passages actually contradict our proposed interpretation of the difficult passages?** If so, to avoid reasoning in a circle, we must discipline ourselves to reject the proposed interpretation and to accept an interpretation that is consistent with the rest of the Bible.

Third, and most importantly, the “basics” are not just the plainer passages. Rather, we must **begin with the first principles**, that is, what the Bible says are the first principles. Anything that contradicts the New Testament's teachings on salvation by grace is false doctrine, no matter how appealing the arguments may be. Any interpretation that contradicts the New Testament's doctrine of the Holy Spirit and His working within each Christian is a lie. Of course, there is much more.

And yet we immediately see one of the biggest problems facing the Churches of Christ today. We don't even agree on the principles that form the basis of *all* New Testament doctrine. The Holy Spirit is mentioned in nearly every opening of the New Testament from John through Jude (and in the other books, but just not as often), and yet we are still debating whether the Holy Spirit has done anything since AD 100! If we can't agree on what all the verses dealing with the Spirit mean, how can we hope to reach agreement on the other verses? They cannot be interpreted independently of an understanding of how God works in our lives as Christians today! And for that matter, we still struggle with the nature and scope of grace. Grace permeates every Christian doctrine. In fact, everything we are told in the New Testament is a logical corollary of a sound understanding of grace and the workings of the Spirit. And yet we still find our brothers bickering over whether Christians are saved by faith or works.

Until we reach a common understanding of how we're saved, why we're saved, and even whether we're saved, we are in no position to discuss much of anything intelligently—or more importantly—spiritually. To speak plainly, discussing any difficult issue, such as the role of women, with someone who deeply misunderstands the workings of the Holy Spirit or the power of God's grace is like trying to explain space travel or the

BURIED TALENTS

theory of gravity to someone who believes in a flat Earth. You simply do not have enough of a common understanding of the nature of things to converse on the subject.

I do not mean that you and I must agree on every nuance of theology to be able to talk about women and the Church. Far from it. But the answers to the hardest questions, such as those regarding women, ultimately are found in a deep, rich awareness of our relationship with God and what He has done and is doing for us. The failure of the Churches of Christ to reach a consensus on these elements has quite naturally resulted in disputes in many other areas. But studying the role of women, and even reaching an agreement on the subject, if that were possible, would only be treating a symptom and not the cause of the problem. When we are all more spiritually minded, many things that seem very hard today will appear trivially easy, and much of what seems easy will prove to be very hard indeed.¹⁵

I will make many arguments that draw support from my understanding of grace and the Holy Spirit, and these arguments will appear senseless to those who see things fundamentally differently. But here is where the test of truth is found: **is my position grace-filled and Spirit-filled? or is my position law-filled?**

(2 Cor 3:6) He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Finally, we will often be forced to **decide whether a command is binding today or was imposed due to temporary circumstances that no longer apply**. Some will feel very uncomfortable with such considerations and will even wonder whether such an approach is “liberal.” But such questions are far from liberal. In fact, we have traditionally taught that very many commands no longer apply.

For example, we don’t greet one another with the Holy Kiss, despite the New Testament’s repeated commands to do so (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; I Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). We correctly reason that people always greeted one another with a kiss in the First Century (much as Arabs and Southern Europeans do today). Therefore, we conclude that the choice of greeting—kissing—is a feature of the local culture, rather than an eternal command. We determine whether kissing is to be an eternal ordinance for the church by looking not just at the command itself, but also at the reason behind the command. Clearly, there is good reason to urge a warm greeting among brothers and sisters (“Love thy neighbor.”) Is there a good reason to make kissing the forever-form of the greeting? Finding none, we conclude that the command to greet warmly is to last for the life of the church, whereas the means of greeting depends on the local and temporary culture. Thus, we “culturally limit” the command, and this is sound Bible scholarship.

¹⁵ The author’s *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* deals extensively with exactly this problem.

So even “direct commands”¹⁶ do not always bind Christians today. We must always look at the reason behind the command and ask whether the reason is eternal and whether the way that the command is to be honored is also eternal. The command to greet one another warmly is eternal. The means of so doing was temporary.

We feel very comfortable with this approach in areas that preserve our traditions. But we feel uncertain, even unsafe, when this approach is applied to challenge our traditions. But the principle is sound and the Churches of Christ have followed this principle since our beginnings.

C. Four Alternative Views

In *Women in the Church I*, Osburn reviews the literature on the role of women in the church and states that the positions of the authors may be summarized in four categories (I really have to apologize for the hard to pronounce—and hard to type!—words):

1. Radical feminism
2. Paternalism
3. Evangelical¹⁷ egalitarianism¹⁸
4. Complementarianism or evangelical hierarchalism.¹⁹

The **radical feminist** considers his views on women as overriding any contrary scriptures. Such feminists are liberal in the true sense of the word. Many would consider

¹⁶ Traditionally, those within the Restoration Movement have found commands and authority for practices in direct commands, necessary inferences, and binding examples. But we often forget that we don’t insist on all commands, even the direct ones, or all inferences, or all examples. Thus, we must have some guidelines for determining just which commands, inferences, and examples are binding today.

¹⁷ “Evangelical” is a word coined by Martin Luther and refers to the gospel (*euaggelion* in the Greek). It should not be confused with “evangelistic.” An evangelical church is a Protestant church that is grace and Christ centered and not liberal. The word has come to be used in contrast to fundamentalism, which, in the context of American Protestantism, refers to rule-based churches. Many Churches of Christ are in transition from fundamentalism to evangelicalism.

¹⁸ Cottrell uses the term “biblical feminism.” Osburn refers to the egalitarian school of thought as “evangelical feminism.” I consider each a poor choice of terms. “Feminism” seems to me to indicate a desire to advocate the cause of women. Thus, “feminism” seems to me to imply a bias in the interpreter.

¹⁹ I will later suggest that “complement” is an appropriate term for the role of wives as to their husbands, based on Genesis 2’s account of the creation of Eve. “Complement” does not carry any connotation of subordination. It is ironic that those who call themselves complementarians have chosen to refer to themselves by a term that is inconsistent with their defining viewpoint.

BURIED TALENTS

1 Timothy as uninspired and not truly written by Paul purely on the evidence of Paul's command that women not teach or exercise authority over men in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Some would question Paul's inspiration in general, arguing that no inspired man could have so demeaned women.

We need not spend much time with this approach to the Bible. I devoutly believe in the inspiration of scripture and am writing this book for the benefit of those with the same conviction. The radical feminists are not invited to this discussion.

We must be careful, however, not to confuse those feminists who challenge the inspiration of scripture with those non-radical interpreters who find equal rights for the sexes in the scriptures. It is easy for those who believe that women are subordinate to men to ridicule the views of those who find equal rights in the Bible by treating all egalitarians the same. There is, of course, a very large difference between those who accept the Bible as inspired and those who accept only those parts of the Bible that happen to suit their biases.

Paternalism is a view of women that is equally as wrong as radical feminism. A paternalist not only believes that women should be subject to men, but a paternalist often feels free to legislate rules in addition to those found in the Bible to assure that the church will operate as he wishes. It is, of course, just as wrong to add rules to the Bible as to take rules away. Thus, the paternalist is just as wrong as any true liberal.

Osburn cites F. Lagard Smith as an example of those writing with a paternalistic view. In Smith's *Men of Strength for Women of God*,²⁰ Smith struggles to bring his traditional views on women to a practical conclusion:

I don't mean to cop out on this point, but it is the main principle about which I am most concerned.

Smith then mentions the difficulty in finding any verse or biblical principle that would condemn allowing women to serve communion in a silent role or to hand out church bulletins. He then concludes,

Somewhere along the line, the biblically mandated principle of male spiritual leadership is eroded. And *somewhere* along the line, the participation of women in the life of the church is contrary to God's way This is why women participating even in relatively neutral activities, such as passing the communion or leading the singing or reading the Scripture, is dangerous—even if they do not lead ultimately to headship roles. ... Crack the door open in biblically neutral areas of service, and we will soon find it

²⁰ Republished in 1998 as *Male Spiritual Leadership*.

to be a threshold to the biblically ordained leadership roles themselves.²¹

It is hard to imagine how one can seriously argue that it is wrong to allow women to perform “biblically neutral” roles. You and I might well disagree over what is biblically neutral, but surely we can agree that no one has the right to legislate against women taking on a role that the Bible itself does not deny them.

One of the fundamental principles on which the Restoration Movement—and, indeed, the Protestant Reformation—is based is the All-Sufficiency of Scripture. (*Sola scriptura* is the famous Latin slogan used by the Reformers for this principle.) It is simply the idea that the Bible is all that we need and that it is wrong to invent rules in addition to the Bible itself. This is much of what we mean when we say that we are to be “silent where the Bible is silent.” We readily criticize the Catholic Church for seeking to bind rules imposed by popes and church councils, but we are every bit as wrong when we state that—even if the Bible does not condemn the practice—women cannot silently pass communion or hand out church bulletins!

Another characteristic common to paternalists is a tendency to demean both women and men. For example,

On the plus side, women are more open to the supernatural and spiritual realm—more willing to trust in the mystical and miraculous. On the minus side, many women go too far and succumb to fraudulent spiritual leaders and emotionally appealing but spiritually deceptive ideas.

... On the plus side, men are ideally suited to be in positions of spiritual “authority.” They provide a rational, cautious stability which, if sometimes overly entrenched, prevents spiritualism from running unbridled to its own destruction.²²

This kind of argument is not only insulting to many women; it is also downright silly. After all, the “fraudulent spiritual leaders” that women are supposedly inclined to follow are men. How does this make men better qualified to lead? Some men are rational and cautious. Some are foolish and impetuous. Some elders are very emotional. Others very studious. Do congregations that have no male leadership characteristically run unbridled to their own destruction? I’ve seen some of our congregations do exactly that. They were all headed by an exclusively male eldership. Why does being “overly entrenched” make men “ideally suited” for authority? Isn’t this plainly self-contradictory?

²¹ Pages 292-294 (italics in original).

²² F. LaGard Smith, *Men of Strength for Women of God*, page 264.

BURIED TALENTS

Burton Coffman, who is normally a very sensible commentator, in a note captioned “On the Deceivableness of Women,” states,

It is a gross mistake to view the natural capacity of women for being deceived as in any manner whatever a reflection upon womankind. It is positively her most adorable characteristic. ...

But are there not historical examples of strong-willed, powerful women, impossible to deceive, who now and again have held the rod of empire or the affairs of state with great ability? Yes, indeed! But exceptions do not make the rule. Wherever such leadership exists in women, it is still a masculine trait. ... Nature produces a two-headed calf now and then, but that is not the rule.²³

Also consider F. Lagard Smith’s analysis:

Far from men being spiritually superior to women, and therefore exclusively entitled to occupy positions of spiritual leadership in the home and the church, I believe the reason is just the opposite. I suggest that men may be put in positions of functional leadership because they are *less* inclined to be spiritual than women, because they are not *naturally* as spiritually oriented as women. Therefore God thrusts them into leadership roles so that they may maintain spiritual strength through the ongoing exercise of spiritual responsibility.²⁴

Excuse me? Smith is saying that God wants men to be elders because they aren’t very spiritual, but by being elders maybe they’ll catch up with the women. If Smith’s opinion of men is close to true, we can only pray that we will have women elders soon! How can we justify appointing the *least* qualified to positions of authority? Does this comport with God’s teachings on the use of our talents and gifts?²⁵ And how can Smith simultaneously contend that men are ideally suited for church leadership and that men are less inclined to be spiritual than women?

Such views of men and women insult *both* sexes. Whatever God’s will for men and women may be, it is not based on such a misunderstanding of the human condition. The paternalistic views of men and women being published today would not have made much sense in the 1950’s, and are absurd in light of recent experience. Who would call Margaret Thatcher, Sandra Day O’Connor, Golda Meir, Elizabeth Dole, Condoleezza Rice, or Indira Gandhi “gullible” or incapable of leadership—not to mention Elizabeth I

²³ James Burton Coffman, *Commentary of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus & Philemon*, (Firm Foundation Publishing House, Austin, Tex. 1978) page 172.

²⁴ Smith at 267 (italics in original).

²⁵ See, e.g., 1 Cor. 12. This question will be addressed in more detail later.

and Catherine the Great? Are we to dismiss all such women as “two-headed calves” and freaks of nature, or does God have a place in His Kingdom for women with the gift of leadership? Certainly any view of the Bible that leads to demeaning God’s creations is wrong.

Paternalists are thus further characterized by the following errors:

1. Paternalists are often insensitive to the influence of culture on their own thinking and would even vigorously deny that such a thing could be possible. Thus, paternalists do not consider the possibility that the only reason they oppose women passing out church bulletins (while gladly permitting women to supervise the church nursery) is that they are used to seeing women in some roles and not in others—and not based on any disciplined approach to scripture.

2. Paternalists overly rely on “proof-texting” scripture. Rather than analyzing what Paul or Peter wrote in the context of the entire Bible, the historical setting, and the particular purpose of the letter, paternalists insist on interpreting verses that suit their biases out of context.

3. Paternalists often have a legalistic view of grace, and thus see any deviation from traditional lines as “apostasy,” that is, falling away from salvation. They thereby make agreement on every minute detail of the role of women a test of salvation and fellowship. (Certainly there are many paternalists who have a fairly broad view of grace—F. Lagard Smith would be an example.)

4. While never so intended by its adherents, paternalism results in serious cases of abuse of wives and children. Far too many men find in this school of thought a rationale to dominate their wives to the point of abuse. The abuse is often psychological rather than physical, and often the only scars are a loss of the woman’s self-esteem and personhood. And yet the problem is real—ask any experienced Christian counselor.

Being in a college town, my congregation often has to deal with emotional scars left on the daughters of church members who found in this mode of thinking a ready excuse to emotionally ruin their children. I assure the reader that the percentage of daughters of church members who arrive at college with serious emotional problems resulting from physically or emotionally abusive homes is far higher than most would imagine. While the men who teach this view of scripture never intend that their view be distorted in this manner, the fruit of the tree is apparent to the counselors and therapists.

Subtler but just as troubling is the lack of self-esteem that many of our older women suffer from. The older women in church beg to hear lessons on self-worth over and over again, and yet cannot persuade themselves that they have value in the eyes of God. No one ever preached that women have no value—not as such—and yet very many of our older women have *learned* that they are unimportant. This is why I am unimpressed by the assertion of many authors who state that their paternalistic views are

BURIED TALENTS

supported by many of the older women in their home congregation. While I don't doubt for a minute that many older women would strongly avow that the paternalistic view of the world is their own view and the view that they are happiest with, these same women will often have very deep emotional scars and adjustment problems resulting from a lack of self-esteem.

The problem is real and cannot be rationalized away. Denial is easy, but denial only condemns our daughters and wives to continuation of a serious and severe problem. Neither can the problem be solved by telling men not to abuse their wives and children. Too often the men think that they are not being abusive at all, but are simply insisting on God's plan for female submission. And too often our daughters leave home and arrive at college either taking the notion of submission to men far too literally or fleeing the church to escape this notion altogether. There must be a better approach.

And yet the Bible repeatedly teaches submission. Nothing that I've said or experienced changes that. But we are not teaching the true, biblical view of submission. If we were, our mothers, wives, and daughters would be far better adjusted and happier, and far freer of emotional scarring.

Finally, I must add that not all who agree with the paternalists are guilty of these errors. Many have been influenced by these teachings without having independently considered their merits. Thus, I do not intend to characterize all who believe this way. Rather, I am speaking only of the intellectual champions of this school of thought that has had such a great influence over the Church's practices.

This leaves for consideration the "moderate approaches": **hierarchalism** and **egalitarianism**. The two views differ markedly in some areas but also find much common ground.

The egalitarian school of thought finds that the Bible teaches that in Christ "there is neither ... male nor female" (Gal. 3:28), such that, although men and women are not the same, those passages that limit the role of women in the church should be understood as speaking only to the cultural circumstances to which they were written. Thus, these passages are no more binding today than the commands to greet one another with the Holy Kiss, to wash one another's feet (John 13:1-11; 1 Tim. 5:10), to forsake the wearing of jewelry (1 Tim. 2:9), to lift holy hands in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8), to maintain a list of widows over the age of 60 to serve as church officials (1 Tim. 5:9-10), or to abstain from the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29. Cf. 1 Cor. 8).

The hierarchalist school of thought finds that God's creation of Eve as Adam's "helpmeet" (KJV, Gen. 2:18) or "suitable helper" (NIV, Gen. 2:18) denies to women any

role as leaders of any men for all time.²⁶ Hierarchalists point to numerous New Testament passages as affirming the subordinate role of women while simultaneously contending that the subordination of women does not make women in any way inferior.

While not universally the case, hierarchalists tend to consider 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 as applying only in the cultural situation in which it was written but consider 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as still binding.²⁷ Some hierarchalists would permit women to take on any role, even limited public speaking, that is not a “headship” role (see 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). Thus, women could publicly read scripture or give testimony but could not teach, preach, or be elders.

Egalitarians, however, believe that the Bible requires each Christian to be allowed full use of his or her gifts and talents in the service of God.

Common to both is a strongly held belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture. While some falsely accuse the egalitarians of rejecting scripture, in fact, unlike the radical feminists, egalitarians insist on holding to the inerrancy of scripture—although they refuse to be bound by traditional interpretations of scripture.

Also common to both is a tendency to bring their own biases to the consideration of scripture. As is true of all four positions, it is easy to assume that the Bible supports a particular view without seriously and objectively considering the text of the Bible in textual and historical context. It is easy to find blatant examples of this error in all schools of thought. Thus, we must carefully discipline ourselves to avoid this error. And we cannot reject a school of thought by pointing to the errors of some of its adherents. All schools of thought have made bad arguments and false accusations at some time or other.

²⁶ Cottrell admits that this argument doesn’t hold up to scrutiny and instead relies on the fact that Adam was created before Eve as creating an eternal hierarchy. See the later discussion on 1 Tim. 2 for a discussion of that argument.

²⁷ See, for example, Rubel Shelly, “A Responsible Challenge to Traditions,” *In Search of Wonder* (Howard Publishing Co., West Monroe, LA 1995) (Lynn Anderson, ed.), pp. 90-92.