

BURIED TALENTS

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In Search for a New Consensus

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CHAPTER I PREFACE

The Christian community has struggled with understanding the Bible’s teachings on the role of women in the church since the First Century. The Restoration Movement,¹ of which I am a part, has struggled with these teachings since its inception. In fact, the Restoration Movement’s long insistence on congregational autonomy and the right of each Christian to interpret the scriptures for himself (or herself)² has resulted in quite a divergence of opinion over the years. And yet, while it is easy to document a wide variety of opinions among the leading thinkers of the Restoration Movement, our practices within the Churches of Christ have been remarkably uniform. Our uniformity is all the more remarkable given how very little biblical support there is for much of what we do (and don’t do).

Consider this: There are only a handful of verses that deal particularly with what women can and can’t do in the church:

(1 Cor. 14:33b-35) As in all the congregations of the saints, *women should remain silent in the churches*. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

(1 Tim. 2:11-15) A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. *I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man*; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

¹ An American religious movement beginning around 1800 resulting in the present-day Churches of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ (Independent), and Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), with combined membership of around 4,000,000. The author’s background is Church of Christ, distinguished from Christian Churches/Churches of Christ (Independent) primarily by its practice of *a cappella* congregational singing and non-use of conventions and missionary societies. Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) are distinguished from the other branches of the movement by having a national denomination organization and tolerance of liberal theology, as defined later in this book.

² I have not changed references to “brothers” or “he” to non-sexist terms like “siblings” or “he” to “he/she.” Such changes make the reading very tedious. We’ll just have to agree that such “male” references are of indefinite gender unless the context otherwise indicates, as is always the rule in standard English. While I must concede the bias inherent in our language, no one has come up with a readable alternative.

Additionally, the familiar passages in 1 Timothy and Titus setting forth the qualifications for elders and deacons state that an elder or deacon must be “the husband of one wife.”³

Certainly, if one considers these verses to pronounce laws that are independent of local culture that thus remain in effect today, we should not have female elders or deacons and we should not allow women to speak in the assemblies or to teach or to have authority over a man. But where in all this do we find a command denying women the privilege of silently distributing the Lord’s Supper? Where does the Bible say that teenage boys—and not girls—should silently pass out handouts during the services? Or that only men should pass out the announcement sheets? And what scripture denies women the right to attend church business meetings? Even if they must be denied the right to vote on church business, to prevent their exercise of authority, isn’t their input worthy of consideration?

Where does the Bible permit a woman to confess Jesus during a church service? Why don’t we wait until church is over to take her confession? How can we allow a woman to head the pre-school department when there are some men who volunteer for nursery or Vacation Bible School work? And how can we have women as non-deacons taking on greater responsibility and authority than many men take on as deacons? For example, if a man must be a deacon to be in charge of cutting the grass, locking the building, or counting the collection, how can a woman be in charge of Vacation Bible School, the pre-school, or taking food to the bereaved?

Surely, we must admit that our practices do not strictly comply with our doctrine. We impose non-biblical restrictions on women out of traditions born out of nothing but the sexism of the past, while at the same time granting women authority as program heads and administrators that we would require a man to be a deacon to undertake.

And while we claim to teach a strict interpretation of these passages, we are not really all that strict. After all, while we don’t let women ask questions during the assembly (and rarely men!), we do allow women to ask questions in Sunday School class. Moreover, we never require women to ask their husbands at home. We freely allow them to ask the preacher questions about his sermon at church—just not during the service. Paul did not say for women to wait until after services to ask questions—he said the women should ask their husbands at home.

And, of course, we allow women to teach men—in our colleges, junior colleges, and high schools—so long as the subject is not the Bible. But Paul did not say that women should not teach men the Bible. He said that women should not teach men. Similarly, we don’t require our wives to give up non-church jobs that involve having

³ 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6.

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authority over men. If one of our wives is promoted from grade school teacher to principal, her husband will gladly cash the increased paycheck, even though this promotion puts her in authority over male teachers, custodians, bus drivers, and lunchroom workers.

But Paul did not limit his command limiting a woman's authority to church affairs. Indeed, our traditional interpretation is that Paul bases his command on the relationship of men and women founded in the Garden of Eden, millennia before there were churches, Sunday Schools, or church colleges. If God put men over women, He did not do so only in their marriages and in church.⁴

Clearly, we have some hard thinking to do in this area. And certainly the problem is not limited to the Churches of Christ or even the Restoration Movement. I've seen Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Baptist Churches fight and divide over these very same issues.

And I must add that current issues such as women's liberation, the Equal Rights Amendment, or "equal pay for equal work" do not cause the controversy. Any honest church historian knows that these questions were being debated long before women could vote or even own property.

The purpose of this book is not to pursue a personal agenda. Being of the male gender, as we say in West Alabama, I have no dog in this hunt. Rather, I only insist that we teach a doctrine that we are willing to practice and can defend from the pages of scripture. We should impose no restrictions on women that the Bible does not impose, and we should grant them no power that the Bible disallows. We should stop pretending that we "speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent"⁵ and actually do what we say we do.

I began my investigation into this area with just such thoughts in mind. Clearly, we are tradition-bound—but what does the Bible really say? Is it possible to discover the truth of the matter despite our layers upon layers of tradition, orthodoxy, biases, and all?

And perhaps not so surprisingly, I have found my position changing over the years. I can recall teaching a series of Sunday School classes on this topic three times before composing the first draft of this book. Each of the first two times that I taught, I

⁴ Osburn, in *Women in the Church* 2, p. 232 ff., cites Kevin Giles, "A Critique of the 'Novel' Contemporary Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 Given in the Book, *Women in the Church*," *Evangelical Quarterly* 72 (2000), as providing a thoroughly researched argument that until the last few decades the near unanimous view of the Christian community was that women could not exercise authority over men in any circumstance, including in the workplace, due to the innate inferiority of women. Those who contend that women are to be subordinate to men at church but may supervise men at work have produced an interpretation just as novel to Christianity as the view that women are not required to be subordinate to men.

⁵ One of the defining slogans of the Restoration Movement, coined by Thomas Campbell.

concluded that although we are not true to the scriptures, such passages as 1 Timothy 2:11-15, while seemingly somewhat arbitrary, are binding today because Paul based his conclusions on eternal principles that he says are found in Genesis.

The third time I taught the subject, I decided to prepare more carefully and to pay particular attention to what the accounts of the Creation and Adam and Eve in Genesis 1-3 really say. Paul finds his commands in Genesis (he doesn't re-write Genesis or add his commands to Genesis). Therefore, before coming to any conclusion, I set as a standard that a true understanding of Genesis would yield a true understanding of Paul's commands. If someone were to present an interpretation of Paul's writings that is not found in Genesis 1-3, that interpretation must be false.

With this insight reached before knowing the conclusions that it would lead to, I undertook my study. I was, quite frankly, surprised at the results.

Notes on better understanding this book

Use of translations. All biblical quotes are taken from the New International Version translation (NIV), unless otherwise indicated. I will often disagree with the translators of the NIV and will offer alternative translations. Translators are human and make mistakes just like the rest of us.

Definitions. Some definitions will prove helpful. When I refer to an opinion or practice as "traditional" or those holding to the tradition as "traditionalists," I do not imply that such opinions are wrong. Rather, I am referring to those views that have been typically taught by mainstream Churches of Christ in the southeastern United States over the last several decades.

When I speak of the "Church" I am normally referring to the Churches of Christ. I do not thereby intend to judge the salvation of the those outside the Churches of Christ.

By "conservative" I normally mean "believing in the inspiration of scripture and that Christ literally became flesh." This is what the word means in theological circles. If I ever say "liberal," I mean not conservative, that is, denying the inspiration of scripture and the incarnation.⁶

Unfortunately, when we in the Churches of Christ say "conservative," we usually mean legalistic, that is "inclined to find a rule." When we say "liberal," we usually mean "not a legalist," that is, "not inclined to find a rule." Because I know what a "liberal" really is, I do not call any of my brothers in Christ liberals, no matter how much I disagree

⁶ The Bible's teaching that Christ, a member of the Godhead, became literally human in literal space-time in the form of Jesus, son of Mary.

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with them. To do so would be to slander them, which would be a sin. Because I know what “conservative” really means, I will not call those who find rules in the Bible that I cannot find conservatives. I am a conservative. I try not to be a legalist.

Thus, when I speak of “legalists,” I refer to those who are inclined to find a law when there is doubt. The term will take on differing shades of meaning as we learn more about legalism.

Further reading. I must give due credit to the works of many authors who have guided me through this wilderness of conflicting opinions. I strongly recommend the following sources for further reading:

Carroll D. Osburn, editor, *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, vol. I & II* (College Press Publishing Co., Joplin, Mo. 1993 & 1995) (hereinafter “Osburn, editor, *Essays on Women*”). These volumes collect essays by faculty members of Abilene Christian University, David Lipscomb University, Harding University, Harding Graduate School of Religion, and other schools as well as a few prominent preachers. These (needless to say) conservative authors consider the major passages and biblical issues dealing with women.

Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church—Refocusing the Discussion* (Restoration Perspectives, Abilene, Tex. 1994) (hereinafter “Osburn, *Women in the Church 1*”). Osburn wrote the book to encourage productive discussion of the women’s issue, based on a reasonable, intellectually sound approach to Bible study, rather than emotion, traditionalism, or Pharisaism. This book should be considered required reading for all who approach the subject.

Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church—Reclaiming the Ideal* (ACU Press 2001), is a substantial rewriting of *Women in the Church 1*, reflecting much of the research found in *Essays on Women* (hereinafter, “Osburn, *Women in the Church 2*”).

Everett Ferguson wrote a review of *Women in the Church 2* that questions many of Osburn’s conclusions, providing one of the more responsible and useful critiques of Osburn’s egalitarian views. *The Christian Chronicle* (2001)⁷ (hereinafter, “Ferguson”). Ferguson, a professor at Abilene Christian University, along with Osburn, is well known for his book *Early Christians Speak* (Sweet Publishing Co. 1971).

Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Mass. 1992) (hereinafter “Keener”). This is a thorough, conservative discussion of the primary texts and is very well documented.

⁷ Available at http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID254851CHID133750ICIID787258,00.html

J. Stephen Sandifer, *Deacons: Male and Female?* (self-published P. O. Box 35296, Houston, Tex. 77235-5296, 1989) (hereinafter “Sandifer”). This is a scholarly, very well researched book. Sandifer is a minister of a Church of Christ and has written what must be considered the definitive resource in this area.

Robert H. Rowland, *“I Permit Not a Woman ... To Remain Shackled,”* (Lighthouse Publishing Co., Newport, Ore. 1991) (hereinafter “Rowland”). No other author does as good a job of pointing out the inconsistencies of the traditional positions of the Churches of Christ. He’ll surely persuade you of wrongness of many of our traditionally held views.

My earlier book, *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* (Power Source Productions, Nashville, Tenn. 1995), sets forth in much greater detail the views on God’s grace expressed herein.

I have searched out and read books by authors from schools of thought that I ultimately chose to disagree with, including Goebel Music’s *Behold the Pattern* (Goebel Music Publications, Colleyville, Tex. 1991); and F. Lagard Smith’s *Men of Strength for Women of God* (Harvest House Publishers, Inc., Eugene, Ore. 1989), and *The Cultural Church* (20th Century Christian, Nashville, Tenn. 1992). Those arguments of authors such as Smith that are not dealt with in the text are dealt with at length in the previously cited texts, especially Osburn and Keener.

Of particular value to my own study is Jack Cottrell’s *Gender Roles & the Bible: Creation, the Fall, & Redemption: A Critique of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (College Press Publishing Co., Joplin, Mo. 1994)(hereinafter “Cottrell”). This is the most intellectually honest work by those insisting on the subordination of women to men that I have found. Indeed, because Cottrell is a professor at Cincinnati Bible Seminary, affiliated with the Christian Church (Independent), I am sure that his book will soon become a standard source for many with traditional views within the Churches of Christ.⁸

Cottrell carefully reviews and criticizes the writings of the egalitarian (women are not subordinate to men) school of thought. Where the arguments of the hierarchalist school have been shown wrong by the egalitarians,⁹ Cottrell often admits the error. Cottrell carefully lays out the basis for his views, generally refusing to hide behind purely emotional appeals or to question the integrity or salvation of those with whom he disagrees.

⁸ The Churches of Christ and Christian Church/Churches of Christ (Independent) were a single religious movement until about 1906, when they divided over instrumental music and missionary societies. The two groups retain much in common and often use one another’s books and even Sunday School literature.

⁹ I’ll define these terms shortly.

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I make no claim to be free from error. This material is offered for your consideration. Despite my best efforts, because I'm human and thus imperfect, it probably contains some mistakes. I'd be delighted to get your input. It is offered to help you understand the Bible better and to allow the Church to better serve our Lord. Please approach it from that standpoint. Take nothing personally. Consider only what is best for the work of the Lord. Our own needs are subordinate to the needs of the work of the Church, the need to reach out to others, and the need to help the poor.

If you find any mistakes or think of any way to improve the book, or if you have questions, please pass them along to me. I will not be offended by your pointing out my mistakes! I'd far rather fix them so that I don't repeat them.

This book does not reflect the "official" or accepted position of any congregation or any person other than the author.