



A L L G O D ' S

AN EXPLORATION
OF THE CALL OF WOMEN
TO PASTORAL MINISTRY

P E O P L E

JOHN E. PHELAN JR.

ALL GOD'S PEOPLE

JOHN E. PHELAN JR.

A L L G O D ' S

AN EXPLORATION OF
THE CALL OF WOMEN TO
PASTORAL MINISTRY

P E O P L E

CP
Covenant Publications
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Covenant Publications
5101 North Francisco Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625
(773) 907-3328, communication@covchurch.org

Copyright © 2005 by Covenant Publications. All rights reserved.

This booklet was commissioned by the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality of the Evangelical Covenant Church. It is available through the Covenant Bookstore by calling (800) 621-1290 or by ordering online at www.covenantbookstore.com.

The poem “Martha’s Request, Jesus’ Answer” by Ginger O’Neil on page 44 is from CBE *Priscilla Papers*, Volume 12, Number 3, reprinted with permission.

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE	
The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation.....	1
CHAPTER TWO	
Women in the Greco-Roman and Jewish Worlds.....	13
CHAPTER THREE	
The Prophetic Heritage of Israel.....	25
CHAPTER FOUR	
Jesus Removes the Boundaries.....	37
CHAPTER FIVE	
Paul and the Ministry of Women.....	49
CHAPTER SIX	
Ordination and Pastoral Ministry.....	63
CONCLUSION.....	77

PREFACE

In 1976 the Evangelical Covenant Church decided at its Annual Meeting to approve the ordination of women to pastoral ministry. Since then many gifted and godly women have served ably in the various ministries of the church. Many others have struggled to find adequate places of ministry or have experienced painful rejection. All have heard questions about the appropriateness of their call and place in ministry.

The materials that follow were developed as a means to address the lingering questions about women in ministry and to promote the whole-hearted embrace of their gifts by the church. Many of the arguments concerning women in ministry have focused on the handful of “hard passages” in the Bible that some think should prevent women from inhabiting pastoral roles in the church. A more positive case can be made by considering the Scriptures’ “trajectory of liberation.” The Bible looks forward to a time in the kingdom of God when all God’s people will be priests, all God’s people will be holy, and all God’s people will have the Spirit. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that time has come. The “kingdom life” God will give to all creation is now present in the church where even now all God’s people are priests, holy, and have the Spirit. Old limitations are left behind in the new thing God is doing.

Preface

I want to thank President Glenn R. Palmberg of the Evangelical Covenant Church for his support of this project and his enthusiasm for the ministry of all God's children. I also want to thank Doreen Olson, Donn Engebretson, Gary Walter, Carol Lawson, and David Kersten from the leadership team of the Evangelical Covenant Church for their encouragement and support. The Commission on Biblical Gender Equality of the ECC has also been very supportive of this project as has Christians for Biblical Equality and their leader Mimi Haddad. A very special word of thanks and appreciation is due to Sharon Cairns Mann who, in addition to editorial work on this guide, provided the suggestions for group process and exercises, and added sidebars and quotes.

JOHN E. PHELAN, *President*
North Park Theological Seminary

CHAPTER ONE

The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation

OPEN MY EYES that I may see
Glimpses of truth thou hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

—*Clara H. Scott (1841-1897)*

Evangelical Christians are characterized by a commitment to the Scriptures. Evangelicals insist that Christian faith should be firmly rooted in the Bible, regardless of how they understand the nature of biblical authority. This has not meant, of course, that there have been no significant theological differences among evangelical Christians. Very different views of eschatology, the sacraments, the role of the Holy Spirit, church order, and women in ministry are found in communities of equally committed followers of Christ. And this list could be significantly extended. Why do so many people of good faith and good heart, who believe in the same God and read the same book, come up with different views of what is and is not “biblical”? Because agreement on the authority of the Bible does not necessarily lead to agreement on its meaning. The task of *interpreting* the Bible to discover its meaning is not an easy one.

This first chapter examines some of the challenges, pitfalls, and

opportunities of biblical interpretation to help address a troubling question for many churches: Should women be permitted to serve as pastors of local congregations or is that role reserved for men? The chapters that follow explore the historical, cultural, and theological issues that make this question so difficult for many.

These chapters lay out the following argument: that it is God's intention that all of his people, male and female, should serve him on an equal basis, and that all God's gifts are open to all God's people. This means that women should be free to serve Christian churches in any capacity, including pastor.

Lenses

No one ever comes to the Scriptures without a set of lenses. Every person has a worldview that is usually unnoticed and unacknowledged. It is absorbed from our parents, our communities, our schools, our churches, and society as a whole. It helps to tell us who we are and to find our place in the world. We normally do not even think about our worldview unless someone challenges it. It is sometimes disconcerting to find out that another person has a very different view of the way things are. What makes

"ANY CHALLENGE to the biblical truth must be taken seriously and serious answers given. There are those who would entrench themselves in the 'traditional' teaching without giving serious thought to the inconsistencies they both live and teach. Others would use the framework of experience to interpret Scripture and come to the conclusion that the experience of women requires us to abandon Scripture because it is patriarchal and cannot be relevant for today. Neither position deals with Scripture with adequate integrity. Instead we must approach the texts with eyes to see and ears to hear God's message for the church today. We need to look for clear biblical teaching that seeks to find God's principles rather than either retreating into unexamined tradition or throwing out Scripture as irrelevant."

Marilyn B. Smith, *Gender or Giftedness* (World Evangelical Fellowship Commission on Women's Concerns, 2000), 5.

sense to me may not make sense to someone else. If I have been taught, for example, that it is possible for God to intervene to heal someone when I pray, I may appear to be superstitious and naïve to someone who believes only medical science can help.

Our worldviews are formed by our stories. Our lives are located within a narrative that has a beginning and an end. These narratives tell us where we came from and where we are going. We find our identities in our relation to those beginnings and endings. But each of us is part of more than one story. We are, in fact, part of many overlapping stories: national stories, racial stories, religious stories, and family stories. Some of these stories are more important to us than others. What are some of these overlapping stories and how do they help or hinder us in interpreting the Bible?

The Jewish Story. This story begins with the call of Abraham. It continues with Moses, the Exodus, and the Law. It includes the story of the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, the exile and restoration of the people to the land, and the promise of Messiah. All Jews and Christians are a part of this story. Responses to this story vary. Some Jews are very serious about rigorously keeping the ancient Law of Moses. Others respect those laws but consider them a part of their past. Some Jews are still waiting for Messiah to come. Others look to politics, science, and increased human understanding to solve the problems of the world. All of them are formed by the same story, but in all cases another story overlaps that original story and gives it a distinctive shape.

The Christian Story. This story includes the Jewish story or at least a Christian version of it. Jesus of Nazareth is the star of the Christian story. He arose in Israel as a teacher, healer, and savior. He called men and women to follow him and turn from death to life. For most Christians the death and resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises to Israel. Jesus is seen as the one who fulfills the messianic hopes of Israel, albeit in an unexpected manner. The promise of the new heaven and the new earth will be fulfilled in due time when Jesus returns to set up his kingdom. Of course, not all Christians agree on the details of this. In fact,

nearly every part of the story has been questioned. But no one can make a claim to be a Christian without taking this narrative seriously. But there are more overlapping stories to consider.

The Western Scientific Story. Even the most conservative Jew or Christian living in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe is profoundly impacted by the Western scientific story. This has been the foundational story of our culture since the Enlightenment and overlaps with every other story in helpful and destructive ways. This story is based on the scientific method and the rigorous search for truth it entails. According to this story, empirical evidence is required in order to substantiate truth. Theories must be tested. Those tests must be repeatable by others. What cannot be tested and repeated cannot be shown or known to be true. The Western scientific story is skeptical about truth claims that cannot be tested under laboratory conditions. This has often put this story at odds with the various religious stories of our culture. On the other hand, the scientific method has greatly enriched our understanding of our Jewish and Christian stories. Archeologists, historians, literary scholars, social scientists, and anthropologists, among others, have given us profound insights into the worlds of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of Jesus and Paul. And few of us would want to give up such benefits of the Western scientific story like good health care, rapid transportation, and air conditioning! Christians in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe cannot avoid the overlap of these stories.

These are not the only stories that act as lenses to our reading and understanding of the biblical text. As suggested above, each of us has a family story and other important overlapping stories. Those of us raised in the church have a “church story”—both denominational and congregational. We were taught how to read and understand the text—sometimes badly. Other factors determine how we read: whether we are women or men, old or young, educated or uneducated, rich or poor. Our national stories also profoundly affect the way we read the Scriptures. Citizens of the United States will read things differently from citizens of Sweden. Citizens of Canada will read things differently from citizens of India. All

this is not necessarily good or bad. It can both help and hinder our reading of the Bible. But it is inescapable.

The danger is that we frequently let our stories distort our readings of the biblical text, without even knowing it. We fail to reckon with our “lenses” and read as if we had no prejudices, assumptions, and misapprehensions. The Bible is a richly complex and difficult book. This does not mean it is beyond our understanding, but it does suggest that careless and ignorant readings have done a great deal of harm.

When a book has the authority of the Bible, it is even more important that we read it humbly and carefully. A misreading can be devastating. This is why we read the Bible as part of a *community*. In 2 Peter 1:20-21 we are told “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” We read without guidance to our peril. We need everyone’s story to challenge our potential misunderstandings. The more narrow and parochial we are, the more we fail to hear the stories of others, and the more likely we are to abuse the Scriptures and use them in oppressive and abusive ways.

Challenges

What are the challenges to be faced if we are to read the Scriptures well and understand God’s will for the role of women in the life of the church?

The Challenge of Translation. The Bible was originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Most people who read the Bible today do not read it in its original languages, but rather, read it in translation. In addition, no one who reads it today is a native speaker of the ancient languages in which it was written. Contemporary Hebrew and Greek are significantly different from their ancient predecessors. Every translation is in effect an *interpretation*. By choosing certain English words to translate Greek or Hebrew ones, by understanding the grammar in particular ways, and even by the placement of punctuation and paragraphs, translators shape the way we read and understand texts. They

really have no choice. But they are not infallible.

Furthermore, the discoveries of additional manuscripts, inscriptions, and other literary texts in the last two hundred years have dramatically changed our understanding of the words, phrases, and grammar in the Bible. These new discoveries help us understand the biblical texts and give us fresh insights into how to read them. This is not the first time this has happened. The Reformation was in part sparked by a return to reading the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew. In some cases the accepted Latin text was a mistranslation or a misunderstanding of the originals. We continue to discover, even to this day, information that helps us in our search for insight.

The Challenge of History. Suppose you found a cache of old letters in a home you bought. If the letters were in a language you understood you could read them easily enough. And perhaps you would recognize certain historical events mentioned in the letters. But if you knew nothing about the person who wrote the letters, you would have a difficult time fully understanding them. Names of family and friends would mean nothing to you. References to shared stories would mystify you. Perhaps certain code words and allusions would escape your notice. If you wanted to understand the letters you would need to do some research. Perhaps you could find friends and neighbors who might be able to illuminate the texts. Maybe you would discover that a family history written by a relative offers additional insight into the letters.

The challenge of reading the Bible is something like the situation posed above. To understand these texts we need to know something about the Babylonians, the Persians, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Hillel, and Gamaliel. We need to understand the public policy of Rome, the economic situation of Greece, and the teachings of contemporary philosophers. We need to understand the religious beliefs and personal aspirations of the ordinary people. And we need to know as much as we can about David and Daniel, Peter and Paul. Fortunately, we have a wealth of resources that cast light on the biblical story. But this does not mean there are no difficulties and ambiguities.

The Literary Challenge. To read anything well you need to know the rules. You do not read a phone book like a mystery novel. You have different expectations of a history book and a technical manual or a love letter and a philosophical treatise. The books of the Bible raise not only translation challenges and historical challenges, but literary challenges as well. What kind of books are these? What did their original readers expect from them? We can make serious mistakes by misunderstanding the kind of literature we are reading.

For example many people have misunderstood Proverbs by reading it like a book of laws rather than a book of good advice. Proverbs is part of a literary genre (or type of literature) called wisdom literature. Wisdom literature passes on sage advice to help the younger, less sophisticated person face the complex challenges of life. The advice is pithy, situational, and sometimes even contradictory. In Proverbs 26:4-5 we read, “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” Well, which is it? The answer is, of course, “It depends.” Proverbs is not Exodus. It does not offer laws, but good advice. It realizes that such advice works better in some situations than others. The wise person can tell the difference. A person who reads Proverbs to be promulgating laws makes a serious mistake.

We can make other reading mistakes: the Gospels are not modern biographies and we should not expect them to be. They follow their own rules in telling the story of Jesus. Paul’s letters are not theological treatises but were written to specific communities to address particular challenges in those communities. We will understand the Gospels and Paul’s letters better if we know what their original readers thought they were reading when they picked them up.

The Interpretive Challenge. This is perhaps the greatest challenge of all. One scholar called this moving from what the text “meant” to what the text “means.” Secular historians reading the Bible would wrestle with the issues of translation and grammar, of history, and of genre. They would even pursue what the text meant to the original writers and

readers. But believers go a step further. They insist the text not only meant something, it *means* something. It is authoritative today and not just a matter of antiquarian interest. Once you have determined what the Bible says, you still have to determine how it connects with your life and the lives of your family and community. There is general agreement about how to approach issues of translation and grammar, history and genre, even if the results are quite different from one student to the other. But agreement on how to move from *meant* to *means* has been more elusive.

As suggested earlier, biblical interpretation is never an individualistic enterprise but always done in community. This means not only that you listen to your fellow church members or denominational leaders, but that *you give the dead a vote*. How has the church read these texts and understood them? How have the wise, the learned, and the holy wrestled with these texts throughout the church's history? This does not mean the church is infallible. The Protestant reformers insisted that the Roman Catholic Church had strayed from the primitive gospel and needed to be renewed. Even ancient readings can be misreadings. Nevertheless, *tradition* is not a bad word. Even if the tradition is wrong, as it sometimes is, we do well to pay attention to it.

Furthermore, as suggested above, students of the Bible must not only take the history, culture, and language of the ancient society seriously, we must take the history, culture, and language of our *own* society seriously. We must pay close attention to those lenses we mentioned earlier. Each one of us needs to ask ourselves, "How do they affect my reading for good or for ill? Am I reading my situation into the Gospel of Matthew or the Epistle to the Romans? Are my unexamined assumptions distorting how I understand Ephesians?" Once we have accounted for our lenses, we face an even greater challenge. How might those ancient words be expressed in the words of our culture? How might Paul's solutions to the problems of Corinth be solutions to problems of our own congregations? How does the good news of Jesus become good news for our neighbors? Can we make an analogy between our situation and theirs?

Another interpretive problem is the fact that there are ancient

problems described or addressed in the texts that no longer challenge us. For example, is 1 Corinthians 8 irrelevant because we no longer worry about purchasing “meat offered to idols” at the grocery store? Furthermore, we now face new problems not even contemplated by the ancient writers. For example, what does the Bible have to say about genetic engineering?

Christians believe that the same God who inspired ancient writers also guides our study and worship today. Jesus promised his disciples that his Spirit would guide them into all the truth (John 16:13). He did not promise that this would be easy. The process of reading, studying, interpreting, and applying the Bible is an unending one. On top of that, the challenge of mission deepens and extends the challenge. Why? Followers of Jesus are not only faced with understanding the ancient culture and their own culture, but also the cultures of those they long to reach with the gospel.

Finally, if we believe that the same Spirit that inspired those ancient writers enlivens our study, worship, and prayer, we can take the risk of making connections between their writings and our own situations. As suggested earlier, we should never do this alone. We should always do it in community. We must also do it with humility and prayer because we can be wrong. Our biases and our ignorance can get in the way. But we also believe the Bible is a living and powerful book of enduring authority and power.

Translator J. B. Phillips once wrote that translating the New Testament was like rewiring an old house with the current still on. There is enduring power in the words of the Bible. Sometimes they make your fingers tingle; sometimes they knock you off your ladder! This is because God’s Spirit is still present and powerful in God’s word.

Some Rules and Observations

It is not possible in such a brief introduction to do justice to the task of biblical interpretation. In addition to the challenges, warnings, and opportunities mentioned above, I want to share some common rules for good interpretation that will guide our study. This is far from comprehensive.

The bibliography will give some suggestions for further study.

The part should be read in terms of the whole. This interpretive rule suggests both that any individual passage in an author's work must be read in terms of the whole work, and also that individual passages in the Bible must be read in terms of the movement and intention of the Scripture as a whole. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:5, Paul indicates that women publicly prayed and prophesied in churches. This suggests that whatever 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 means, it cannot mean Paul expected women to be absolutely silent in the church; otherwise he contradicts himself. This rule also requires students of the Bible to consider the trajectory, the direction of God's story as a whole. For example, this study guide presents the biblical story as the story of our liberation and suggests that to move away from this liberation back to bondage is to violate God's intent for his people. This interpretive rule is based on the principle that clear passages help us to understand more obscure ones.

Cultural questions cannot be ignored in the interpretation of the Bible. For example, all students of the Bible must ask what in the New Testament is of enduring significance to contemporary Christians and what is unique to the situation of the first-century church. Even the most conservative commentators recognize the need to take account of the challenge of culture. The aforementioned question of "meat offered to idols" is an example of a problem unique to first-century Christians. What about other cultural questions? What about the "head coverings" in 1 Corinthians 11? By suggesting this practice, was Paul being a good missionary, acting to make sure the local people took no offense, or was he establishing a rule for all time?

These are very live questions for contemporary missionaries. When do cultural practices violate the gospel and need to be addressed and when should we follow a cultural practice for the sake of the same gospel? Paul was convinced that in Christ "there is no longer slave or free" (Galatians 3:28). He also insisted that Philemon treat his slave Onesimus like a brother (Philemon 16). His theology undermined the practice of slavery, but he nowhere attacks it in his letters. Was Paul acting wisely in light of the cultural situation? Did he fear for his fledgling communities

if they came out against one of the very foundations of their cultures? Or did he compromise the gospel by failing to speak out? These are difficult questions. Nevertheless, *the cultural questions must be examined in terms of the trajectory of Scripture as a whole and the intent of the gospel.* We should neither baptize their culture or ours as “right” or “perfect.” We should let the gospel challenge and transform both.

Conclusion

The task of discerning the answer to the question of whether women should be permitted to serve as pastors of local congregations or not is not an easy one and must be studied with the same careful rules of interpretation as any biblical question. And yet, we’ve also seen in this chapter that sometimes people try to answer that question without carefully scrutinizing their own lenses and worldviews, and that this is a question that is highly influenced by our own worldviews.

In the chapters that follow, we will address additional matters of translation and grammar, history and culture, interpretation and application. The intent is to account for our lenses, hear the original message of the prophets and apostles, and make a Spirit-led connection between their world and ours. Evangelical Christians believe the Scriptures continue to speak to our world and that through careful study, prayer, communal conversation, and humble waiting for the Spirit, we can hear that word afresh. For women, this is a work of equality, liberation, and hope.

For Discussion or Reflection

- 1) What are your lenses? What is the primary lens through which you have been taught to read the Bible? What are your stories? How do they overlap and interact? How do they help or hinder your reading of the Bible?
- 2) What are your stories regarding women in the church and women in pastoral leadership? What were you taught growing up? How does your culture and experience confirm or challenge those teachings?
- 3) What has been your attitude about using other sources to help you understand the Bible?

Chapter One

- 4) When has new information about culture, history, or grammar helped you understand the Bible? When has that new information troubled or confused you?

Recommended Reading

Achtemeier, Paul J., Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Fee, Gordon D. *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

Witherington, Ben. *New Testament History: A Narrative Account*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001.

CHAPTER TWO

Women in the Greco-Roman and Jewish Worlds

In this chapter, we examine the cultural and political setting of the world into which Jesus came. This is more than just boring history. Understanding the setting in which the early Christian church emerged is important because the setting shapes the meaning of Jesus' (and Paul's) words and actions. Only to the extent that an individual understands the setting can he or she understand the significance of Jesus' response to that setting. This chapter first examines why context matters. Then it covers the context of Jesus and the early church and how that context determined the role of women. The chapter covers imperial Rome with its strong Greek influences, the Jewish culture within imperial Rome, the cultural understanding of "private" and "public," the influence that philosophers had on cultural views of women, attitudes about education, and finally, how the early Christian church was influenced by these other factors.

In Preparation Read

The following texts reveal something about the cultural attitudes toward women in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds.

- "Do you have daughters? Be concerned for their chastity and to not show yourself too indulgent with them. Give a daughter in marriage

and you complete a great task; but give her to a sensible man. Do you have a wife that pleases you? Do not divorce her; but do not trust yourself to one whom you detest.”—*Sirach*¹ 7:24-26

- “It is a disgrace to be the father of an undisciplined son, and the birth of a daughter is a loss. A sensible daughter obtains a husband of her own, but one who acts shamefully is a grief to her father. An impudent daughter disgraces father and husband and is despised by both. Like music in a time of mourning is ill-timed conversation, but a thrashing and discipline are at all times wisdom.”—*Sirach* 22:3-6
- “Do not look upon any one for beauty, and do not sit in the midst of women; for from garments comes the moth and from a woman comes woman’s wickedness. Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace.”—*Sirach* 42:9-14
- “It is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational elements over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior and the one rules and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind.”—*Politics* 1254b, *Aristotle*²
- “The fact is, the nature of man is the most rounded off and complete, and consequently in the man the qualities or capacities referred to above are found in their perfection. Hence the woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency, less hopeful than the man, more void of shame and self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory.”—*The History of Animals* 608b, *Aristotle*

Why Context Matters

Christianity is firmly rooted in history. Its founding story is not a misty myth from some inaccessible primeval era. Rather, a great deal is known

about the origins of Christianity. For example, Jesus was a Jew who came from the small city of Nazareth, located in the region known as Galilee, a tiny and troublesome backwater of the mighty Roman Empire. Luke locates Jesus' story in time by reference to key rulers: King Herod in Judea, the Roman Emperor Augustus, Quirinius the governor of Syria (Luke 1:5; 2:1-2). The gospels, letters, and historical texts that would become the New Testament all arose from the rich milieu known as the Greco-Roman world. The Romans were the unquestioned military and political masters of the Mediterranean world. But Greek philosophy and culture continued to have a profound impact. Of course, as mentioned above, Jesus was a Jew. Therefore, in addition to the Roman and Greek cultures, Jewish religious thought, history, and political aspirations also shaped his world, and all of these cultures converged in the new community called the church.

The books of the New Testament are all "occasional" pieces. This means they were written for particular situations in particular communities. The authors of these pieces all had an audience in view. For example, scholars believe that the gospel writers had specific audiences, with specific challenges in mind when they wrote. Paul, too, wrote letters such as 1 and 2 Corinthians to a very specific community with unique problems. This does not mean Paul expected the letters to be read only by the Corinthians. This is clearly not the case for these letters or the other Pauline texts. When Paul addressed issues of marriage and family, slaves and masters, morality and immorality, he was writing to specific communities and he had their specific cultures and problems in mind. But, this does not mean his words mean nothing to other cultures and communities—even modern ones.

In order to understand Paul's opinions and advice, the reader must understand something of those ancient Greek, Roman, and Jewish communities. This is not an easy task. In some instances, the evidence is scanty. For example, the surviving ancient writings reveal more about the upper classes of that time than the lower classes. Furthermore, there was no unified Greco-Roman or Jewish culture. It would not be accurate to say "all Jews thought" or "all Romans thought," any more than one could accurately say "all Americans think" or "all Canadians think." But there

is still plenty of very helpful material from the ancient world. In recent years scholars have done a great deal of research to help us understand the place of women in the world of Jesus and Paul. In what follows, we will take a look at some information regarding the role of women in Greco-Roman society.

Imperial Rome

The Emperor Augustus saw himself as a traditionalist, a reformer of Roman values. He was especially concerned for the Roman upper classes. In Roman society, as in the Greek before it, it was crucial that there be legitimate male heirs to carry on the family. This meant that the fidelity of a Roman matron was crucial to both family and society. Augustus not only encouraged fidelity, but also promised benefits to women who bore more than one child. Three living children meant a freewoman was no longer forced to have a guardian controlling her affairs. (Whereas young men had guardians only until puberty, females “both under and over puberty, on account of the weakness of their sex as well as their ignorance of business matters”³ had guardians throughout their lives.)

Pregnancy and childbirth were fraught with dangers for Greco-Roman women. It was not infrequent for women to die in childbirth. Miscarriages were also frequent. This was in part because girls were often married at twelve or thirteen years old and became pregnant before they were physically able to safely bear children. The deaths of so many young women in childbirth made a bad problem worse. Greek and Roman families much preferred male offspring. Not only did males carry on the family name, females were expensive to marry off and a constant worry to their male relatives. This sometimes resulted in infanticide, with female infants being exposed to the elements. On other occasions they were given up to be raised as slaves. An Egyptian husband living within a few years of the birth of Christ wrote to his pregnant wife Alis, “If by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it be, if it is a girl, cast it out.”⁴ A similar opinion comes from a Roman source from the time of Christ: “A daughter is too expensive, and we do not have the resources. With great regret I have to say that if it should be a girl, we will have to let her die.”⁵

This meant fewer and fewer women, which then resulted in younger and younger marriages.

Throughout this period there was a double standard regarding sexual fidelity. Greek and Roman men had recourse to slave women and prostitutes. Their fidelity was not seen as a serious problem. In fact sexual relations with a social inferior was an expected activity for Greco-Roman males. A good host would provide slaves and prostitutes for the use of his male friends during the male only parties the Greeks called “symposia.” Countless vase paintings celebrate the sexual activities during these symposia. Nevertheless, adultery with a social equal or superior was still a very serious offense for both men and women since it called into question the legitimacy of the children of the offended husband.

The Jewish World

Jews shared the same concern about female purity and legitimate offspring that was prevalent in the Greco-Roman world. If anything, they were even more protective of “their” women than the Romans. Jews were opposed, however, to the exposure of infants. This does not mean they did not share the Greco-Roman preference for sons. In Sirach one reads, “it is a disgrace to be the father of an undisciplined son, and the birth of a daughter is a loss” (22:3). In fact, according to one Jewish scholar, “every source views the birth of a daughter as a disappointment.”⁶ According to Sirach, daughters were nothing but trouble for a father. First, fathers worried that their daughters would be attractive to men and be seduced. Then they worried that their daughters would not be attractive enough to find a husband. Then they worried that those daughters could not bear children or would prove unfaithful.⁷

Public v. Private

Both Romans and Jews relegated women to the private sphere—to home and family. Men were entrusted with the public sphere—politics and government, business and commerce. Women were entrusted with the care of the children and home. The ancients clearly believed that women had no head for business or politics, in spite of evidence to the contrary.

As mentioned previously, Greco-Roman women were forced to have a male guardian throughout their lives, except in rare circumstances. Jewish women passed from the care of their father into the care of their husbands. The Roman *paterfamilias*⁸ had the power of the family. In the Greek world the father even held the power of life and death over his children. This seems no longer to have been the case at the time of Jesus and Paul (except, of course, for forced abortions and the exposure of unwanted offspring). But the male head of the family still had immense power over women in his household.

Women did enter the public sphere, of course. Poor women, slaves, and lower-class women had no choice but to enter the marketplace. Their survival depended on it. They worked as shopkeepers and waitresses. Some even ran successful businesses. But a highborn woman who attempted to enter the public sphere could be deemed wanton and disrespectful. Her offense was not just social but sexual. Seeking such power was deemed not only inappropriate, but also sexually deviant. Some powerful women worked around these restrictions by using male family members or colleagues to acquire and use power, but this was an exception.

Women and the Philosophers

Philosophers like Aristotle (384–322 BC) had a profound effect on the way women were viewed in the Greco-Roman world and eventually in the Christian world as well. According to Aristotle, women were defective males. They were defective chiefly in their reasoning and intellect. “The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind,”⁹ the philosopher wrote. Women lacked wisdom, rationality, and self-control, according to Aristotle. This means, according to his viewpoint, the man is the natural leader; the free man was to rule over women as he did the slave. Aristotle argues that the reason for this is that “the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority.”¹⁰ Something is lacking, says the philosopher, in the deliberative process of women that requires male leadership.

Women were also seen as the source of sexual temptation. According

to this line of thinking, women's undisciplined and foolish natures made them susceptible to seduction. In addition, as sexual tempters, they distracted men from the real business of life and disturbed their equilibrium. "Blaming the women" is a very ancient game. Women's supposed sexual power over men was feared and attacked. Unfortunately, Aristotle's views had a profound effect on later Christian writers.

Education

Much more attention was given to the education of males than females in the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, as may be expected. Young women were trained in the domestic arts while young men were prepared for the public sphere with training in rhetoric and philosophy. This is not to say women did not learn to read or lacked interest in the more intellectual pursuits. But, such women were satirized for daring to attempt to participate in "male" endeavors. Juvenal advises avoiding a learned woman at a dinner party: "I hate these authority citers . . . who with antiquarian zeal quote poets I've never heard of. Such matters are men's concern."¹¹

SOME JEWISH WOMEN in the time of Jesus might have received some teaching from rabbis, "but for her to leave home and travel with a rabbi was not only unheard of, it was scandalous. Even more scandalous was the fact that women, both respectable and not, were among Jesus' traveling companions. Yet it was an intended part of his ministry that women be witnesses from the earliest part of his Galilean ministry until his death, and benefit from his teaching and healing. This involved their traveling with him so they would understand and be prepared for the significance of his resurrection when they were called upon to be the last at the cross, first at the tomb, and first to bear witness to the resurrection (Luke 23:55-24:11). Jesus rejects much of rabbinic teaching on women's 'flightiness,' inferior nature, and monthly ritual uncleanness."

Ben Witherington III, "On the Road with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and Other Disciples," *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 135.

Christianity in Context

Much more could be said about the role and plight of women in the Greco-Roman world. But perhaps enough is recorded here to suggest how radical the words of Paul were when he wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). For the world into which Paul was writing, both Greco-Roman and Jewish, this new kind of thinking was social, sexual, and political dynamite. It went against the grain of common wisdom and even government policy. It is not surprising that the church was unable to sustain this powerful egalitarian message. We will examine this phenomenon further in the following chapters.

Critics of those who believe in biblical gender equality often argue that advocates for gender equality are simply giving in to the pressures of contemporary culture. In reality, one could argue the opposite: that the “traditional” views of a woman’s place in church and society are a result of “giving in” to the culture.

The message of Jesus and of Paul was radical—too radical to sustain—and slowly the emerging church re-accepted the common views of the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds. The primitive church began as private associations in homes, the private sphere. There, the early believers

“SINCE JESUS is God incarnate, his life and teachings serve as the ultimate ‘norm’ or ‘model’ for how God intended God’s people to relate to one another. Therefore, the attitudes and values practiced by Jesus have priority over other texts that may appear to be in conflict with the teachings of Jesus. . . . The value of this approach . . . is that a case can be made for Jesus taking an ‘anti-status-quo’ stance on women’s issues, i.e., that he advocated both in his ministry and his teachings an elevation of the status of women—an elevation to the place of equality with men, which would have been then and still is today considered radical.”

Kathy J. Pulley, “Women in the Church in Recent Discussions,” *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Carroll Osburn (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995), 7.

embraced Paul's instruction and women participated fully in all ministry roles. But as the church moved from the private to the public sphere and became a visible institution of the Roman world, women were again relegated to more minor ministry roles, and the radical message of Jesus and Paul was submerged by the dominant cultural beliefs.

This shift in church practice simply reflected the role of women in Greco-Roman society and not the roles given by the Spirit in the Pauline churches. This was in part the result of the church moving toward institutionalization. Throughout history, when revivals and movements of the Spirit have revitalized the church, women have had prominent roles; however, as these movements became institutions and sought "respectability," women were again marginalized.¹²

Conclusion

Such was the world of Jesus and of Paul. Such was the world out of which the new Christian church emerged. This places the radical actions and teachings of both Jesus and Paul in a dramatic light. It also suggests that objections to women serving in pastoral ministry may come more from ancients like Aristotle or Augustine than from Jesus, Paul, and the New Testament.

For Discussion or Reflection

- 1) Do the norms of imperial Rome relate in any way to your world or experience?
- 2) How have things changed? How have things stayed the same? Does the powerful impact of the Greco-Roman world still determine relations between males and females today?
- 3) For women: Do you identify with some of the restrictions and prejudices about women and the limitations of their roles in the Greco-Roman world? How have you experienced them?
- 4) For men: Do you identify with the expectations for males in the Greco-Roman world? How have you experienced them?
- 5) Do you see the impact of Greco-Roman thinking in the church today?

Chapter Two

- 6) What would it have been like to be a Jewish woman in the time of Christ? A gentile woman?
- 7) Do your answers reveal anything about why Jesus' relationship to women was unusual for that day?
- 8) How do double standards disadvantage people?
- 9) Name as many double standards in our culture as you can, whether they disadvantage men or women.
- 10) What are the double standards in other cultures?
- 11) Do various double standards exist in churches? If so, what are they?
- 12) Does God have anything to say about double standards? (See verses such as Leviticus 19:36; 24:22; Deuteronomy 25:16; Ezekiel 45:10. Also compare John 8:1-11 and Leviticus 20:10. See also Matthew 19:3-10.)
- 13) The church is supposed to have different standards than the world. Does it?

Recommended Reading

Clark, Elizabeth A., and Herbert Richardson. *Women and Religion*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996.

Fantham, Elaine, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, and H. A. Shapiro. *Women in the Classical World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Gardiner, Jane F., and Thomas Wiedemann. *The Roman Household: A Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Grenz, Stanley J., and Denise Muir Kjesbo. *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

Ilan, Tal. *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.

Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975, 1995.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997; Originally published by Princeton University Press, 1996.

Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination to the Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993.

Endnotes

¹The Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira, was composed about 180 BC and contains the distilled wisdom of Joshua (Jesus in Greek) ben Sira who evidently conducted an academy for young men in Jerusalem. It is part of the apocrypha or deuterocanonical (the books contained in the Greek version of the Old Testament, but not the Hebrew version) books of the Roman Catholic Church, but not accepted as authoritative by Protestants. Nonetheless, whether canonical or not, it is historical and reflects the culture of the day.

²Aristotle, as quoted in Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 197-198.

³Ulpanius, *Rules*, 11.1.

⁴From Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 162.

⁵Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, as quoted in Jane F. Gardiner and Thomas Wiedemann, *The Roman Household* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 98.

⁶Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 46.

⁷Ibid., 48.

⁸Male head of a family or household.

⁹Aristotle, as quoted in Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 197-198.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Fantham, *Women in the Classical World*, 367.

¹²See Stanley J. Grenz, with Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 36-52.

CHAPTER THREE

The Prophetic Heritage of Israel

In order to study the place of women in the life and ministry of the church, it is best to look at the big picture of God’s plan for history. In this chapter we will look at how the prophetic heritage of Israel has a bearing on this subject, and will focus on a key interpretive strategy: using Scripture to interpret Scripture. Understanding the “big story” as told in the Bible helps us understand how to interpret individual Bible passages that sometimes present interpretive challenges.

It is appropriate to begin a study of the subject of women in the life and ministry of the church with the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament); with creation and redemption; with exile and restoration. Why? Because Jesus came proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God, which had been prophesied in the Old Testament: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). What did his first hearers think he meant by that? What did Jesus mean by the “kingdom of God”? And what does this have to do with the subject of women in the life of the church? Israel’s experience of exile and restoration and the prophetic message of the Old Testament are keys for answering these questions.

In Preparation Read

- Isaiah 11:1-12; 25:6-9; 35; 52:13–53:12; 56:3-8; 61; 65:1-5
- Ezekiel 36:24-38; 37:1-14
- Joel 2:28-32

Exile and Restoration

In the sixth century BC the Babylonians invaded the small country of Judah on more than one occasion. They carried away Judah's nobility and talented artisans to Babylon and eventually destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the great temple of Solomon (2 Kings 24 and 25). These shattering events raised profound theological questions for Israel. What had happened? Why had God abandoned them? Was there any hope for the future? The prophets of Israel, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, interpreted these events on God's behalf. They accused the people of long-term faithlessness and failure to follow God. They also offered hope for a better future. Jeremiah said they would have to suffer seventy years of exile for their sins but would be restored to the land (Jeremiah 29:10). Isaiah promised them even more than simple restoration.

The people did return to the land after seventy years, but it wasn't what they expected. The community that returned was poor and threatened on every side. After the Babylonian Empire fell, an even more powerful empire followed—the Persians. The prophets who wrote during this period paint a grim picture of depression and disappointment among the returning exiles. "You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:6).

The temple was ultimately rebuilt, but it was nothing like the great temple of Solomon: "many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy" (Ezra 3:12).

The prophet Isaiah had made glorious promises of what the return

would be like (chapter 35). The desert would “rejoice and blossom” (v. 1), waters would “break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” (v. 6). A road would appear for the return of the people to the land: “No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it” (v. 9). The returning exiles would travel that road and “come to Zion with singing.” “Everlasting joy,” Isaiah promised, “shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (v. 10).

But, the current reality of God’s people seemed to mock this lyrical burst of prophetic enthusiasm. *When* would these prophecies be fulfilled? Was this sad situation really what God intended? Had they failed God again? Such questions surely haunted God’s people.

By the time of Jesus, it had been more than 600 years since the destruction of Solomon’s temple. The people had rebuilt their public institutions and restored the worship of their God. King Herod’s spectacular temple was now the center of religious, political, and social life. But no restoration like Isaiah had promised had occurred. The Jews had passed from domination by the Persians to the control of the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great. During the second century BC, a Greek king named Antiochus Epiphanes tried to integrate the Jews into his kingdom religiously and politically. He forbade the Jews to circumcise their children. He placed his own high priest in the temple and offered pigs on the altar of God, both of which the Jews considered horrifying desecrations. These abominations led to the Maccabean revolt,¹ as told in chapters 2-4 of 1 Maccabees.² For a century after this revolt, Jewish kings reigned in Jerusalem. But they were a disappointment, and eventually Jerusalem was once again controlled by a foreign power—Rome. For some Jews it seemed that the exile had been extended from seventy to almost 700 years! Some must have wondered if it would ever end.

It was into this context of disappointment and faint hope that Jesus came preaching about the kingdom of God. Surely the people heard echoes of Isaiah in the words of this young prophet from Galilee. Surely some heard him say the long dusty years of exile were finally coming to an end. There is a sense in which the book of Isaiah was Jesus’ ministry manual. He seemed to understand his ministry and God’s purpose in Isaiah’s

terms. What were these terms? What did Isaiah predict and expect?

The Gospel According to Isaiah

In Isaiah 11 the prophet predicts, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of King David, Israel’s most powerful and beloved king. Isaiah expected that now-humiliated genealogical line to be restored. The spirit of the Lord would empower this new ruler who would “delight in the fear of the LORD.” He would be a just judge and would treat the poor and powerless fairly. He would destroy the wicked and restore the weak. His rule would usher in not just a new era for Israel, but for the whole world. It would mean not just a renewal of Israel, but of the whole creation: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6, 9, see also Isaiah 61).

Not only Israel, but also the gentiles will seek the Lord: “On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations [that is, the gentiles] shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10). The Lord will restore all God’s scattered people back to the land and end the hostility and jealousy that divided them. This was Isaiah’s vision: a reunified people under an ideal king in a peaceful land (Isaiah 11:1-13).

But there was more in Isaiah. In Isaiah 24:21–25:10 the prophet describes the “day,” the special day of God’s judgment and restoration. On this “day” the Lord will reign “on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem.” Both Israel and the nations, the gentiles, would fear God (25:3). At that time there will be a special banquet. This banquet is not just for rulers and the wealthy. It is not only for Israel. It is for “*all* people.” Both food and wine are spectacular: “rich food filled with marrow” and “well-aged wines strained clear.” But God’s actions would not be limited to providing special meals and ruling his world. “He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations [that is, gentiles]; he will swallow up death forever. Then the LORD God will wipe

away tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth” (25:7-8). This stunning hope for the end of death and tears is clearly not just for Israel, but also for “all the nations,” that is, all the gentiles as well.

In Isaiah 35 the prophet not only predicts the flowering of the desert as the people return to the land, but he also declares, “then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” As in Isaiah 25, he predicts that upon the return to the land the “ransomed of the LORD . . . shall obtain joy and gladness; sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” All human brokenness, physical as well as emotional, will be restored in this new “day.”

Jesus and Isaiah

There are echoes of Isaiah’s prophecies throughout the ministry of Jesus. He eats with tax collectors and sinners and feeds 5,000 on a hillside in anticipation of that great “messianic banquet” of Isaiah 25. His final meal with his disciples is a foretaste of that banquet. He gathers the people, scattered “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). He heals the blind, the deaf, the lame, the speechless as anticipated in Isaiah 35. So important was Isaiah’s vision to Jesus that he preached his first sermon at Nazareth from Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:16-30).

“MANY BELIEVE that Luke 4:16-30 was the inaugural address of Jesus’ ministry. A homily presented in his hometown of Nazareth, it summarizes his mission. As the Messiah, he will release victims. He will restore people to wholeness. He will transform societies. These visionary goals were not, however, fully achieved before his death. Jesus calls us who claim to follow him to continue his mission. We are to bring good news to the poor. We are to proclaim liberty to all captives, release to the imprisoned, God’s blessing on the oppressed. We are to release, restore, and transform. To be a disciple means to confront injustice and minister to the oppressed.”

Dorothy Yoder Nyce, *Jesus’ Clear Call to Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 34.

Jesus extended the borders of the kingdom more than many in Israel were willing to contemplate. He included people in his kingdom community that were disreputable and despised by many in the leadership of his people. Following the blueprint of Isaiah, Jesus welcomed tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, and even gentiles into the new community that he was forming. In addition to the passages cited earlier (the references to “all peoples” and “all the nations”), there is also Isaiah 56, in which God tells the prophet, “Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. . . . And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; *for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples*” (Isaiah 56:3-7, italics added).

In that “day,” in other words, the old legal boundaries that kept gentiles and eunuchs out of the house of God would be eliminated. Moses had declared in Deuteronomy that gentiles and eunuchs and other “damaged” people could not approach God’s house (Deuteronomy 23:1, 3-8; see also Leviticus 21:16-23). In contrast, Jesus insisted that *everyone* ought to have access to God. In the new kingdom, Jesus taught, the old codes that limited access to God are eliminated. *Everyone* is free to come to God’s house and worship—not just the priests and the Levites or the ritually clean.

Perhaps this is why Jesus was so furious when he found the moneychangers in the “court of the gentiles.” They were keeping the gentiles from enjoying what little access they had to the temple of God. In fact, in his attack on them he even quoted Isaiah 56 (Mark 11:15-17). By his actions, Jesus proclaimed that in the new kingdom, those once kept out would be brought near. Differences in “relative holiness” would be eliminated. We will examine this idea further in subsequent chapters.

But there was even more. Isaiah 60 and 61 were evidently extremely important to Jesus. In these passages, Isaiah declared that all the

people would be righteous (60:11). In fact, all the people would be *priests!* “You shall be called priests of the LORD; you shall be named ministers of our God” (61:6). This is in line with the expectations God originally established for his people in Exodus 19:6: “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Evidently, that time was *now*. According to the New Testament, this promise that all God’s people would be priests is now experienced in the church (see 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:5b, 6; 5:9-10; 20:6). Jesus preached that in the kingdom of God, *all God’s people are priests!*

“IN CHRIST JESUS, those whom the Fall had cast far off from each other could now be brought near through the blood of Christ. In his flesh, he made them all one by demolishing the walls of hostility that separated them. With them, he created in himself one new humanity by reconciling them to God in one body through the Cross (Ephesians 2:13-16). . . . the reconstitution of the community of oneness is to be Christ’s ultimate redemptive achievement. During his ministry and as the outcome of it, Jesus anticipated the full restoration of community as God had willed it in Creation.”

Gilbert Bilezikian, “Biblical Community versus Gender-Based Hierarchy,” *Priscilla Papers*, 16:3 (Summer 2002): 7.

Later in Isaiah, God expresses his disgust at people who attempted to preserve their sense of special holiness and separation, who warned others, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.” Such people, God says, “are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long” (Isaiah 65:5). God despises those who try to keep those barriers in place, who pretend a special holiness. On “that day” the old policies separating the holy from the unholy will be eliminated. The prophet Zechariah looked forward to a time when “there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, ‘Holy to the LORD.’ And the cooking pots in the house of the LORD shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar, and every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them to boil the flesh of the sacrifice. *And there shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD on that day*” (Zechariah

14:20-21, italics added). Even the humblest cooking pots of the simplest resident of Jerusalem will be worthy to prepare offerings for God. Even the jingling bells of the horses will be holy on that “day”! *All God’s people will be priests. All God’s people will be holy.*

The Death and Resurrection of Israel

In this new kingdom—the kingdom that God was preparing and Jesus was preaching—the old holiness barriers would be removed. No longer would there be a distinction between priest and people, between holy and unholy, clean and unclean. How would this come about? One scholar has argued that the Old Testament is about the death and resurrection of Israel.³ In a sense, Israel had died during the exile. In the same sense, Israel was resurrected upon its return. We see this most clearly in the famous vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Here Israel complains, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost” (v. 11). The Israelites are as good as dead. Their bones are crumbling to dust in the wilderness. God tells them, “I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people” (v. 12). How does he do this? He breathes his Spirit-breath into them and a mighty army rises up. “I will put my spirit within you,” he declares, “and you shall live” (v. 14). Israel died in the exile. In the restoration of the kingdom, Israel is resurrected. It is the Spirit that makes us alive. It is the Spirit that makes us holy.

Metaphorically, Jesus was the representative Israelite who died and was raised from death so that individually and collectively Israel and indeed all God’s people could be raised. This fits with the notion of the Servant in Isaiah 52 and 53 who was “wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.” The image of the Servant sometimes seems to be corporate (i.e., the people of Israel) and at other times, as in these passages, seems to be an individual—perhaps the representative of corporate Israel. The Servant, in his suffering and death, makes “many” whole and righteous (Isaiah 53:5, 11). Paul, for one, certainly seems to look at Jesus’ death in this way (Romans 5:12-19; 6:1-11).

The promise of the Spirit of God is important in the prophecy of Ezekiel. In the Old Testament, prophets, kings, and other significant figures

possessed the Spirit of God. But Ezekiel promises God would put his Spirit in all of them, as Jeremiah had promised them a new heart (Jeremiah 31:3; see also Ezekiel 36:26-30). All of them would now possess God's Holy Spirit. God also promised through the prophet Joel, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit" (Joel 2:28-29). In that day—that is, in the kingdom—there will be a democratization of the Spirit. The early church saw this fulfilled in the falling of the Spirit on the infant church at Pentecost (see Acts 2:14-21). This was the time, the "day," when all God's people would have the Spirit.

Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and other prophets promised a new kingdom after the long exile came to an end. Jesus also preached about that new kingdom, but rather than promising it in the future, he proclaimed its arrival—and with its arrival, he preached, came the end of the extended exile. Jesus eliminated the old boundaries and barriers that had separated priest and people, holy and unholy, Spirit-filled and empty. In this new kingdom, *all God's people are priests, all God's people are holy, and all God's people have the Spirit.*

"THE TASK for disciples is to let Jesus' teaching and living offer clues to how God organizes and is present among human beings. These clues focus on peace or well being for all, on mutual empowering. They suggest that Jesus wants to reverse patterns that have 'reigned' within nations, churches, structures, and the family."

Dorothy Yoder Nyce, *Jesus' Clear Call to Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 54.

Conclusion

There are clear implications in the prophetic books of the Old Testament concerning the nature of Jesus' community of the kingdom now called the church. The fact that all God's people are priests, holy, and have the Spirit suggests that preserving the old limitations and boundaries is a violation of God's kingdom intent. We will examine this more thoroughly

as it relates to the place of women in the life of that community in the following chapters.

For Discussion or Reflection

- 1) Talk about the idea of restoration. What does it mean?
- 2) Make a list of things in your world and life that you wish were restored.
- 3) Think about the situations of oppressed people. What do you think restoration would mean for them?
- 4) Why are people so determined to separate, classify, and set boundaries?
- 5) Why do humans seek places of superiority? Why do they want to appear better, holier, and more important than the other?
- 6) What does the Bible have to say about this? See Mark 10:35-45 and Acts 10.
- 7) What are the dangers of removing old boundaries? Can it be done well? How?
- 8) Is the idea of male superiority consistent with the old limitations and barriers discussed in this chapter or with God's kingdom intent?
- 9) Are there still assumptions of male superiority in our culture? How have you (both men and women) experienced them?

Recommended Reading

Gowan, Donald. *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

McKnight, Scot. *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997.

Endnotes

¹The Maccabees were a priestly Jewish family. The Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem and purified the temple in 164 BC, events that are still commemorated by the holiday of Chanukah.

²Maccabees is also the name of a historical book that is part of the Protestant Apocrypha and the Roman Catholic canon of the Old Testament.

³Donald Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

CHAPTER FOUR

Jesus Removes the Boundaries

The book of Isaiah was Jesus’ “ministry manual.” When Jesus came preaching the “kingdom of God,” he meant the kind of kingdom predicted by Isaiah and the other prophets. In this new kingdom God will offer to exiled Israel, *all God’s people will be priests, will be holy, and possess the Spirit*. In this new kingdom everyone will have *access to God*—including the unclean, the damaged, and even the gentiles.

Jesus proclaimed this new kingdom in both word and deed. His teaching was startling and attractive. His healings and miracles proclaimed the presence of a new reality. He touched lepers and other unclean persons. He healed on the Sabbath and declared all foods clean. He ate with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. These bold actions indicated something significantly different had been set loose in the world. What was it? What did all these actions suggest? This chapter seeks to answer those questions. We will see that Jesus had a very different view of “holiness” than his opponents and many other Jews. Although the New Testament calls all God’s people to be holy (1 Peter 1:14-16), the religious leaders of Jesus’ day held notions of holiness that were limiting and even destructive. Jesus believed in holiness, but not their kind of holiness! The kingdom Jesus preached was not just for the pure, but also for the least, the lost, and the losers.

In Preparation Read

- Mark 1:21-28, 1:40-3:6; 5; 7:1-23; 15:33-39
- Acts 10-11, 15
- Leviticus 17-26

“LIKE OBEDIENT CHILDREN, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Jesus and the Problem of Holiness

A strong Old Testament tradition held that holiness was about *separation*. Items intended for sacred use and items intended for common use were kept scrupulously apart. People who had been defiled or made “unclean” were kept away from those who were clean or holy. Jews ate only “clean” foods in obedience to God’s laws. Even the land of Israel itself could be defiled. According to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, “These traditions assume that the land of Israel is held precariously and is in jeopardy if contaminated or polluted.”¹ Preserving purity or maintaining holiness was not just a religious matter, but profoundly social, political, and personal. Leviticus 17-26 laid out a “holiness code.” The commandments in this passage were extensive, covering “aspects of community life concerning farming, prostitution, care for the aging, holy priests, holy festivals, and holy sacrifices.”² Particularly in the period after the fall of Jerusalem, many Jews became committed to the preservation of the community through a rigorous enforcement of this code. Over time this idea of holiness as separation became deeply entrenched.

The long, difficult exile stimulated a great deal of theological reflection in Israel. Why was God extending the exile and delaying the kingdom? Was it because Israel was failing to keep the law faithfully and polluting the land? Perhaps Israel was not holy enough. Leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah tried to restore the post-exilic community by stressing obedience to the law.

They sought to purify the community, for example, by prohibiting Israelites from contracting marriages with foreigners and requiring those who had foreign wives and children to send them away (Nehemiah 13:23-27; Ezra 9 and 10). Prophets like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi railed against the peoples' compromises and failures and called for their purification. In spite of all their efforts, Israel continued under foreign domination.

As the exile continued, some leaders recommended even stronger measures to assure holiness. They recommended that ordinary people follow the special purity laws normally applicable only to priests (Leviticus 21 and 22). A group called the Essenes formed a semi-monastic community in the desert to keep the law even more faithfully and await the coming of Messiah. They evidently meant to create a pure community in the wilderness away from the temptations and pollutions of the rest of the land. By the time of Jesus, many Jewish leaders were convinced that such separation from impurity ensured holiness. Unfortunately this belief served to marginalize the people who most needed the compassion of the community: sinners, the unclean, foreigners, the sick, and, as we will see, women.

It is no wonder Jesus came into conflict with the Jewish leaders. His understanding of holiness and impurity were radically different. Not only did he touch lepers and eat with tax collectors and sinners, he declared himself "Lord of the Sabbath" and thus free to heal on the Sabbath (Mark 2:28; 3:1-6). He declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19) and even insisted the most holy place in Israel was not just for Jews but for all people (Mark 11:17). Jesus seemed to overturn their most cherished notions of holiness and obedience. How could he do this?

For one thing, Jesus' notion of holiness was quite different. For his opponents holiness was *fragile* and needed to be protected. For Jesus holiness was *powerful* and needed to be experienced. Pollution could not hurt holiness—on the contrary, holiness would purify pollution. For Jesus' opponents holiness was about *separation*. For Jesus it was about *access*. Holiness did not raise a wall, it broke it down. Jesus worked to eliminate the old "holiness codes" that kept people away from God. With his arrival, God was doing a new thing. Holiness had a positive aspect. It was not just

about keeping away from impurity. It was about justice, compassionate treatment of the poor, rightly ordered relationships, and the elimination of differences in social power. With the prophets, Jesus insisted that holiness was more than keeping your moral skirts clean. It meant love, justice, and compassion to the weakest members of society.

MORE ABOUT Jesus let me learn,
More of his holy will discern;
Spirit of God my teacher be,
Showing the things of Christ to me.
—*Eliza E. Hewitt (1851-1920)*

The “Holiness Map”

After the time of Jesus, in the second century, Jewish religious leaders recorded a “map” of relative holiness based on oral tradition,³ which ranked persons and places from least holy to most holy. The ranking of places, from least to most holy, was as follows:

- The land of Israel
- The walled cities of Israel
- The city of Jerusalem as a whole
- The Temple Mount within the city
- The Court of the Gentiles
- The Court of Women
- The Court of the Israelites
- The Court of the Priests
- The Holy Place
- The Most Holy Place⁴

Persons were ranked from least to most holy as follows:

- Eunuchs
- Illegitimate children
- Temple slaves

- Freed slaves
- Gentile converts
- Israelite women
- Israelite men
- Levites
- Priests⁵

According to this holiness map, the least holy people needed to be kept away from the most holy people and places. The Gospel of Mark, however, shows Jesus setting out to dismantle these assumptions of relative holiness. Jesus showed that holiness is *powerful, not fragile* and is *about access, not separation*. He demonstrated this in both actions and teachings. At his death the curtain that kept everyone but the high priest from access to the most holy place was torn in two, representing the fact that access to God's redemption was now open to everyone (Mark 15:38).

But as far as Jesus' opponents were concerned, he was *violating* God's laws regarding the holiness of persons, places, times, and things. They thought that by overthrowing the codes of Leviticus, Jesus was not advancing the cause of the kingdom, but impeding it. How did Jesus demonstrate that his notion of holiness was the correct one? How did he demonstrate that holiness is powerful, not fragile, and about access, not separation? The Gospel of Mark offers us some help.

Jesus and Impossible Cases

The stories in Mark 5 describe one of the most important reversals of the holiness code. In this passage, Jesus deals with three impossible cases. All three would be considered "holiness disasters" so far as the law was concerned.

The first case is the case of the Gerasenes demoniac (vv. 1-20). He was a holiness loser, if there ever was one. He was possessed by demons (a whole army of them). He was living in a cemetery, a very unclean place so far as Jews were concerned, surrounded by unclean animals (pigs). And, of course, the Jews considered him unclean as a person because he was a gentile. But this "multiple" uncleanness was not a threat to Jesus at

all. Rather than avoid the man, Jesus healed him and made him a disciple and evangelist. *Jesus demonstrated that holiness is not fragile, but powerful.* The unholiness of this man did not at all threaten the holiness of Jesus. In fact, the reverse was true—Jesus’ holiness was so powerful that it healed him!

The second case was a woman with a severe bleeding problem (vv. 25-34). According to Leviticus 15:25-32, her condition was perpetually defiling. Anything and anybody she touched would be ritually unclean. This condition effectively cut her off from the religious life of her community. It also cut her off from normal familial and social interaction. In addition, she was a woman, which contributed to her marginal condition. In a way, her case was as serious as a leper’s. So, when she forced her way through the crowd to touch Jesus, she took a considerable risk. By brushing up against people, she defiled them and risked their outrage. But when she touched Jesus, her unholiness did not defile him. Rather, his holiness remained intact, and was, in fact, so powerful that it healed her. *Holiness is not fragile, but powerful.*

“[THE HEMORRHAGING WOMAN] REPRESENTS, for example, the unpartnered, childless woman who lacks a male advocate or spokesperson. As a chronically ill woman she is at the mercy of a male medical profession and at risk from incompetent treatment because the female body is less valued and understood than the male body. As a woman whose economic resources are depleted, she suffers disempowerment in a patriarchal society. Without a protector or patron, and linked with no land, city, family, father, husband, or son, she belongs to all marginalized women whose vulnerability leaves them prey to physical danger, legal discrimination, social disadvantage and commercial opportunism.”

Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, “Gender, Ethnicity, and Legal Considerations,” *Transformative Encounters: Jesus & Women Reviewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 43:160.

The third is the most impossible case of all. It is the case of a young girl who died (vv. 35-43). A dead body was perhaps the most defiling thing of all (Numbers 19:11-13). Failure to deal properly with the uncleanness of a dead body could result in being “cut off from Israel.” In this case, not only was it a dead body, but the dead body of a young girl—perhaps one

of the most marginalized people of all in the Jewish scheme of “holiness.” But Jesus touched this dead girl and, as in the case of the woman before her, the dead body did not defile him; rather, he raised her to life. Holiness is not fragile, but powerful.

Mark shows in these three impossible cases that Jesus rendered the old impurities and separations obsolete, ushering in the new kingdom. Note that not only were these three people unclean, but they were also marginal in other ways. Jesus reached out to these marginalized persons—a gentile, a woman, and a dead young girl, the holiness losers of his culture—to demonstrate that in his kingdom there are no losers, only winners.

Access for Sinners

The second concept that Jesus insisted on is that holiness is not about *separation, but access*. The marginalized gentile demoniac, the Jewish woman, and the dead young girl had access to the healing power of Jesus. But Jesus declared more than just physical healing. He also declared that access to him, to his father, and to his kingdom community was open to the spiritually marginalized as well—even to the worst sinners. In Mark 2 the Pharisees grumbled because Jesus was eating with “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:15-16). Why should *sinners* who polluted the land and risked the health of the community have access to the preaching and healing of this obviously gifted messenger of God? Why would he defile himself by breaking bread with such disreputable characters? When Jesus heard about their complaints, he responded, perhaps ironically, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). *Holiness is not about separation, but access*.

The Struggle for Access

This was a difficult message even for Jesus’ followers to absorb. The book of Acts shows Peter and the Jerusalem community struggling with the implications of such openness. Acts 10 and 11 tell the story of Peter’s visit to the gentile army officer, Cornelius, and his subsequent conversion to Jesus’ way. It took a disturbing vision to bring Peter to enter the home of

a gentile. “God has shown me,” Peter told his hosts, “that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” One would think Peter would have figured this out from following Jesus. But the disciples had a notoriously difficult time with this and other parts of Jesus’ teaching.

When Peter returned from his visit to Cornelius, he faced the accusations of his colleagues in Jerusalem: “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Peter told the story of his vision and convinced them

Martha’s Request, Jesus’ Answer

TELL HER, Jesus—

Tell her to get a move on.

She’s sitting so indifferently—

Oblivious to all the Woman’s work

That needs completing.

She’s sitting where she shouldn’t be.

The place below a master

Must be set aside for

His disciples.

Yes, nods Jesus.

That’s exactly why I want her there.

And, Martha, that’s the proper place

For you as well.

—*Ginger O’Neil*

that this visitation was of God. The key for Peter was that these gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just as the disciples of Jesus had on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit bound Jews and gentiles together in one new kingdom community. Peter’s critics were forced to admit that God had offered the same gift of life to the gentiles as he had to the Jews. *Holiness is about access, not separation.*

This, of course, did not settle the matter. It took a later council at Jerusalem to decide whether the newly converted gentiles needed to keep the Jewish law (Acts 15). Even Paul accused Peter of “backsliding” by refusing to eat with gentiles at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21). But the problem did not end there. Throughout the history of the church, this issue has plagued God’s people. It may seem absurd to wonder whether men are holier than women or one race of people more “defiled” than another, and yet these questions keep coming up in various forms. For example, early in the history of the church, Christian theologians insisted that celibacy was the preferred spiritual state. This precept suggested that sexual activity was somehow “dirty” or “defiling,” an idea that came more from

Greco-Roman philosophers and their fear of the “passions” than from the Bible. The wise man, according to Greco-Roman philosophers, avoided the temptations and passions of sexuality.

As a result of this kind of teaching, women have borne, throughout the history of the church, the burden of alleged sexual temptation. Women were by implication dirty and defiling. For many theologians the sexuality of women was dangerous, even demonic. Abbot Conrad of Marchtal wrote: “We, and our whole community of canons, recognizing that the wickedness of women is greater than all other wickedness of the world and that there is no anger like that of women, and that the poison of asps and dragons is more curable and less dangerous to men than the familiarity of women, have unanimously decreed for the safety of our souls, no less than for that of our bodies and goods, that we will on no account receive any more sisters to the increase of our perdition, but will avoid them like poisonous animals.”⁶ Shockingly, the women he was talking about were not ordinary women, but celibate nuns! This is a classic case of blaming the woman for the sexual temptations of men. Unfortunately, examples of blaming the woman could be multiplied many times. Religious leaders deemed female sexuality unclean, impure, and dangerous. For the sake of their *holiness*, wise men avoided or limited contact with women.

This is not just a prejudice of the distant past. The fear of women, their sexuality, and their perceived “uncleanness” is still deeply ingrained

“THE TYPICALLY ARISTOTELIAN depiction of ‘sinner’ posits an ideal, immovable standard against which all else is measured, and the sinner misses that mark by being excessive or defective. Because Aristotle’s concept of the logical and biological ideal is invested with what he identifies as masculine traits, and because his ‘sinner’ comes to represent all who fall short of the (masculine) ideal, ‘sinner’ may be seen as being gendered feminine. . . . If, for example, women are understood as imperfect males, as Aristotle supposes, then women by definitions are always ‘sinners.’”

Teresa J. Hornsby, “The Woman Is a Sinner/The Sinner Is a Woman,” *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 125-26.

in many men and women. Karen Jo Torjesen reports that during the debate regarding the ordination of women, an Anglican cleric said, “a woman offering up the communion offers the sight, the sound, and the smell of perversion.”⁷ Many people are still not able to shake the notion that women are somehow “unclean” and that a woman in the pulpit or assuming a leadership position is, as the cleric suggested, a perversion.

By his actions, Jesus showed that, as Peter put it, we should call no one “profane or unclean.” In Jesus’ new kingdom community *all God’s people are holy*. Even women. There is something deeply irrational and perverse about the notion of the “uncleanness” of women, especially in light of Jesus’ efforts to touch and heal both men and women who were considered especially “unclean” and restore them to their respective communities. The notion that women are somehow “unclean” and unfit for ministry is a violation of the kingdom conviction that *all God’s people are holy, are priests, and have the Spirit*.

Conclusion

The implications of this for the matter of women in the life and ministry of the church should be clear. We can see the struggle to follow the radical way of Jesus not only in the book of Acts, but also in the letters of Paul. Paul clearly recognized the implications of Jesus’ teachings. He clearly insisted that all God’s people were priests, were holy, and had the Spirit. He recognized no barriers to the ministry of any man or woman. He also recognized that the infant churches would struggle with the radical implications of his teachings, as we will see in the next chapter.

Benediction

MAY THE GRACE OF GOD you have received through Jesus Christ cause you to be zealous in proclaiming the new kingdom ideal of holiness: holiness is powerful, holiness is about access.

For Discussion or Reflection

- 1) We’ve learned that Jesus “overthrew” the holiness codes of Leviticus.

Does this mean that we are not called to be holy? Or, as Christians, are we called to be holy? If so, what does that mean?

- 2) Is it possible for anyone besides God to be “holy”?
- 3) Are there still persons, places, times, and things that are considered more holy than others?
- 4) Do you see the notions of pure/impure, sacred/profane operating in our culture? What about in our church culture today?
- 5) Can you think of ways that the Christian church today keeps certain people away from other people, places, or things?
- 6) Why do you think such ideas are hard to shake?
- 7) Read Matthew 15:11, 17-20. What did Jesus have to say about what defiles a person?
- 8) Why was it so difficult for Peter and the leaders of the Jerusalem church to follow the radical nature of Jesus’ teachings?
- 9) Where do you see and experience the blame-the-woman syndrome?
- 10) What are the implications of this chapter for understanding women’s roles in the church?

Recommended Reading

Borg, Marcus J. *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1998).

Brueggemann, Walter. *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

Herzog, William R. *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

McKnight, Scot. *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Neyrey, Jerome H. “The Idea of Purity in Mark’s Gospel,” *Semeia* (35, 1986).

Phelan, John E. “The Function of Mark’s Miracles,” *The Covenant Quarterly* XLVIII, no. 3 (August 1990): 3-14.

Chapter Four

Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination to the Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993.

Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997.

Endnotes

¹Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 98.

²Ibid.

³Jerome H. Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 35 (1986).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 226-27.

⁷Ibid., 199.

CHAPTER FIVE

Paul and the Ministry of Women

In this chapter we will examine the teachings of Paul regarding our “citizenship” in a new community, the freedom we have in Christ, and the eradication of old divisions. These teachings contribute significantly to our understanding of newness in Christ. This newness encompasses a different way of doing things in the new kingdom because we are free from the old laws, boundaries, and restrictions. We have been set free to live fully in the new community. This chapter presents these teachings in the context of Paul’s treatment of and advocacy for women in the new church, as well as the admonitions he has about women.¹

Jesus founded his new kingdom community, the church, intending that it live out the reality of the kingdom of God before that kingdom had fully arrived. Many scholars have noted the “already/not yet” character of Jesus’ teaching. Although the kingdom in its fullness awaits final consummation, Jesus’ followers were already breathing kingdom air and experiencing kingdom realities. As someone put it, the church is “the sacrament of the kingdom.” The church both *is* and *is not* a part of the current order. While Christians live ostensibly as citizens of various countries and communities, our true citizenship, Paul insists, is “in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). This means that whatever country we inhabit or culture we share, our

true commitment is to the kingdom community—a community we *already* inhabit by being Christ’s followers. We must be sensitive to the cultural realities of living “in the world.” We must be good citizens and seek the welfare of our communities. But we must never forget the true source of our citizenship and the true character of our community.

We learn more about this new community in the book of Acts. With the falling of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, Peter declared the prophecy of Joel 2 to be fulfilled.² The “democratization” of the Spirit means that God’s Spirit is given to all his people, not just prophets, priests, or kings. Peter’s visit to Cornelius and the subsequent struggle to acknowledge that even gentiles receive the Spirit show how difficult it was for the early Jewish Christians to absorb this new truth. As both Isaiah and Jesus insisted, this new kingdom would not be just for Jews, but for *all people*, gentiles included. The old rules about clean and unclean (see, for example, the story of Peter’s vision of the sheet full of unclean animals, Acts 10) and even the old marks of being a Jew (circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses, Acts 15) no longer operate in this new community. As Paul would tell the Corinthians, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

We are used to thinking of the word “Christ” as a part of Jesus’ name, but it is really a title, the Greek equivalent of the Jewish word “Messiah” or “anointed one.” The Messiah for the early Christians was Isaiah’s “branch from the stump of Jesse,” the Davidic king restored to his throne. To be “in Christ” means, among other things, to be united with this new king and his new kingdom order. To be “in Christ” means to be in the kingdom or to have one’s true citizenship in heaven. It is another way of saying the follower of Jesus is already participating in the rule of Messiah.

In Preparation Read

- Galatians 3:15–4:11; 5:1-25
- 1 Corinthians 12:1-31; 14:1-40
- Romans 6:1-11

Backsliding in Galatia

Paul spelled out this idea of new citizenship for the Christians in Galatia. He was afraid that after having been set free from the law and its curse they were moving to return to the old law—to the holiness codes with their barriers and restrictions and even to circumcision. Paul was outraged. He told them their actions amounted to a rejection of the Spirit and a “returning to the flesh” (Galatians 3:1-5). He insisted they were rejecting freedom and taking up the yoke of slavery. He warned them that returning to the law and letting themselves be circumcised would amount to “cutting themselves off from Christ” (Galatians 5:4). He was so upset that he wrote, “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!” (Galatians 5:12). Clearly this is a serious issue for Paul!

In chapter 3 of Galatians, Paul told them “the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith” (v. 24). A small child needs the guidance of adults, especially parents, grandparents, and teachers. But an adult “child” does not need to ask the advice of his or her parents about everything! We consider such people immature. Paul saw the Galatians running back to the protection of their old “nanny,” the law. He saw them refusing to grow up and accept the responsibilities given to full-grown sons and daughters of God who possessed the Holy Spirit. Paul thought they were rebuilding the barriers that God had broken down. For Paul, old divisions that had segmented the Greco-Roman world were eliminated “in Christ,” that is, in the new kingdom community of Messiah. In Christ, Paul insisted, “There is no longer Jew or Greek [race], there is no longer slave or free [class], there is no longer male and female [gender], for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (v. 28). Paul did not mean, of course, that slavery had disappeared or that there were no more women. That would be absurd. He meant that in the kingdom, divisions such as race, class, or gender no longer matter. They would continue to matter in the “world,” of course. But Jesus’ kingdom community is “not of this world”—its citizens belong to a different order. The curtain of the temple had been torn in two and now all people have access to God. *All God’s people are priests. All God’s people are holy. All God’s people have the Spirit.*

CARRIE MILES AND LAURENCE IANNACCONO note that “many contemporary readers dismiss Paul entirely as at worst a misogynist, at best unable to rise above the prejudices of his time.” They go on to suggest that this is an unfair characterization and they challenge readers to “contrast Paul’s statement [Galatians 3:26-28] with any other classical, pre-modern statement regarding men and women. For nearly 2000 years, Paul’s statement held the record as the most powerfully egalitarian proclamation in Christianity, Western literature and (probably) world culture. In this verse, Paul directly countered the notion that race, class, or gender had any meaning before God.”

Carrie A. Miles and Laurence R. Iannaccone with Linda Ikeda, *Male and Female in Christ* (San Jose: Carrie A. Miles, 2000), 65-66.

With the arrival of Messiah, Paul insisted, everything changed. We have experienced “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4). Everything is new (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are already resurrected with Christ and only await the final consummation (Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28). We are already living in the new age while continuing to exist in the old. We already are a “new person” while we struggle with the “old person.” Paul says we have already grown up. We have already received our inheritance. Why would we want to go back to being children again? Why would we want to infantilize ourselves by returning to the old order of separation and uncleanness?

Paul knew growing into a new reality is difficult. He pointedly reminds the Galatians not to misuse their freedom: “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Galatians 5:13). The experience of freedom can be intoxicating. Every parent of adolescents knows this! As young people move toward maturity, good parents give them freedom to try new things, to grow, to accept new responsibilities. Sometimes adolescents blow it and misuse their freedom. This does not mean they should be required to return to being children. Good parents will help their struggling adolescents grow through the struggles of freedom to maturity.

Fear of Freedom

All too often in the history of the church, leaders—fearful of the new freedom offered in Christ—re-established old laws and boundaries, ignoring the freedom Christ offers. They infantilized their followers and refused to let them grow through the pain of spiritual adolescence. This seems to be what happened with regard to women in ministry throughout the history of the church. Church leaders, fearful of the spiritual adolescence of women (and many others) and perhaps also fearful of public opinion, used old methods of domination and control to keep things safe and peaceful. They refused to let women (and many others) fully use the gifts God gave them for the sake of Jesus' kingdom community. That community has suffered as a result. Because of a failure of leadership, the church of Jesus Christ has produced many infant Christians and spiritual adolescents. Fearful of freedom and a loss of control, leaders have refused to let people grow. As a result, the church has failed to live up to Jesus' kingdom ideal (for a powerful literary account of this see the story of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov*).

“BIBLICAL EQUALITY means that it is biblically illegitimate to limit a person's identity, status, vocation, or ministry opportunities solely on the basis of that person's gender; it does not mean that gender makes no difference at all in a person's identity or behavior. Because God shows no favoritism, but regards each person as a unique individual, we ought not to presume to do otherwise. . . . Biblical equality is a consequence of God's act of salvation in the new covenant, as indicated in Galatians 3:26-28, which states that we are all 'sons,' or heirs, in Christ, and that there is no longer any distinction in spiritual privilege or prerogative between Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. . . . Equality is reflected in the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelations 1:6), and in repeated New Testament exhortations to believers to honor one another and to be humble and submissive toward one another (Matthew 23:8-12; Romans 12:3, 10; Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3).”

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *The Feminist Bogeywoman* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 26-27.

For Paul the church was a radical new social order. In this new kingdom, the profound divisions of the Greco-Roman social/cultural world no longer mattered. Christ had destroyed the former roles of culture and society that limited, discriminated, and demeaned. For the church to engage in any practices that restore or maintain the boundaries that Christ had destroyed is to reject Christ and his kingdom intent. It amounts to submitting once more to a yoke of slavery. “There is nothing in Christianity that relates only to our salvation; our faith relates to all of life, including the roles of male and female. The issue is whether our attitudes concerning race, social class, and gender will be determined by our oneness in Christ in the new age or by the barriers and values of the old age.”³

Paul taught that the gifts of the Spirit were freely distributed to all, just as Isaiah, Amos, and for that matter, Jesus, had declared. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). “The same Spirit . . . allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (v. 11). “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (v. 13). Paul never limited this Spirit by gender. He made it clear that all the gifts of the Spirit were available for all God’s people.

Women Leaders in the Pauline Church

In the Pauline churches, women exercised Spirit gifts alongside their male colleagues. In 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 (see also 14:1) Paul makes it clear that women possessed the spiritual gift he evidently believed the most important—prophecy. Throughout his writings he makes allusions to women who exercised leadership in the early Christian communities. In Romans 16:3-5 he greets Prisca and Aquila as his “co-workers in Christ Jesus.” It is very interesting that he mentions Prisca first. It is unusual in such a situation that a woman would be mentioned at all. But the fact that she is listed first suggests she was the more prominent figure. Not only do we know that she was the *teacher* of Apollos (Acts 18:24-28), but Paul’s greeting also suggests she was the “co-pastor” with Aquila of “the church in their house.”

Earlier in the same chapter Paul recommends Phoebe to the church

at Rome. He calls her a *deacon* or *minister* of the church at Chenchreae. He also calls her a “benefactor of many and of myself as well.” This may mean more than that Paul received financial support from Phoebe. A benefactor was someone who exercised extraordinary leadership in the Greco-Roman world. Benefactors were often politically and socially connected. It would make sense that such a prominent woman leader would carry this letter to Rome.

In Romans 16:7 Paul writes, “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives, who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” It is now generally accepted, with some dissenters, that Paul means to say Andronicus and Junia are *apostles* in the sense he used the term. In a detailed and careful study in his book *Gospel Women*, Richard Bauckham suggests Junia is the Roman name for Joanna (as Paul was for Saul). Joanna, Bauckham suggests, was “Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza”⁴ who traveled with Jesus and his disciples “and provided for them out of their resources”⁵ (see Luke 8:1-3). He suggests that perhaps by now Chuza had died leaving Joanna/Junia independently wealthy and able to travel with and support Jesus. Bauckham argues that according to Luke’s Gospel, “Joanna, Mary Magdalene, and other women disciples fulfill the conditions Peter specifies in Acts 1:21-22: they have ‘accompanied us [the eleven] during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us.’”⁶ Bauckham speculates that if still living Chuza, a Nabatean, also changed his name to the more Roman friendly Andronicus and joined Junia/Joanna in apostolic work.⁷ Bauckham’s thorough, powerful, and challenging study of Joanna is worth the effort to read. It is a careful, historical study that shows how women could and did act as powerful and effective evangelists, teachers, and leaders in the early church.

Paul mentions additional co-workers in Philippians and Colossians. He mentions two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who “have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers” (Philippians 4:3). These women, in other words, did nothing different than the male co-worker Clement and nameless

others. It is simply wrong to suggest that women like Euodia and Syntyche were merely around to cook the meals and wash the apostles' clothing! The language suggests these women were *evangelists* alongside Paul. For example, in Colossians 4:15 Paul requests greetings for "Nympha and the church in her house." This suggests that Nympha, like Phoebe, Prisca, and perhaps Lydia (Acts 16:11-40) served as leaders or "pastors" of these house churches.

What Happened?

These passages indicate that Paul had no difficulty thinking of women serving as prophets, deacons/ministers, pastors/teachers, evangelists, and apostles. If this is true, why has the ministry of women been such a difficult question for the church? Why have women's ministries been limited and circumscribed throughout the history of the church?

As suggested in an earlier passage, part of the problem was the early church's inability to accept the radical implications of the gospel. Early leaders caved in too easily to the culture that surrounded them. Fearing the attacks of their contemporaries, they understated the implications of the gospel for the liberation of women, of slaves, and of other marginalized people. They created power structures in the church that aped the power structures of the royal court. Priests of the Christian church became state employees and bishops became royalty. Christians quickly forgot the radical egalitarianism of Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul. That these same patterns

"WHENEVER THE PRACTICES OF THE EARLY CHURCH moved towards gender inclusiveness they were counter-cultural, and as such were faithful extensions of Christ's own attitudes towards women. Nonetheless, New Testament church practice did not always reflect as strongly or as consistently as Jesus did the trajectory of the Spirit on gender issues. The proclamation of the Gospel was once again accommodated to the realities of the context, in this case to first century Palestinian Judaism and then to the social norms of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire."

Glen C. Scorgie, "Tracing the Trajectory of the Spirit," in *Priscilla Papers*, 17:2 (Spring 2003):17.

of domination and control still exist in Christian communities is to the eternal shame of the church.

Troubling Words

Christians have also been troubled by some words of Paul himself. Why would Paul recognize women prophets and then turn around and require women to be “silent in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:34)? How should we understand this apparent contradiction? There are many explanations for this difficult passage. The bibliography lists resources that provide more extensive discussions than is possible here.⁸ But if we want Paul not to contradict himself, we need to see this passage as not referring to a general rule silencing women in the church.

One suggestion worth considering is that in verses 34 and 35, Paul is quoting from a letter from the Corinthians. Scholars think Paul frequently quoted from a letter from them (see 1 Corinthians 7:1). This would mean they wrote him suggesting troublesome women should be silenced. Paul’s response is outrage: “What! Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only one it reached?” Are you male leaders trying to seize control of things so much that you assume that God can only speak through you? Do you think the Spirit of God can be that easily controlled or manipulated? Perhaps these male leaders were concerned to look more “respectable” to their community. They may have believed that rowdy, prophesying women would be an embarrassment to the church. Paul wanted things to be done decently and in order, but he didn’t want the women silenced!

A more difficult passage is 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Here it seems that Paul is recommending that women not be able to teach or exercise any authority over a man. It has been suggested that this passage has been massively misunderstood and mistranslated. The Ephesian religious context explains much that is obscure in this passage. Ephesian women had been impacted by the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis whose devotees believed that women were actually *superior* to men. Paul is not making a general statement for all time forbidding women to teach men. This would, after all, contradict his earlier teachings. He is concerned about women full of the Spirit and of the prejudices of former followers of Artemis

attempting to dominate and control the congregations. He is no more in favor of this than he was of the men dominating things in Corinth! First Timothy 2:11-12 has been translated this way: “Let a woman learn in a quiet and submissive fashion. I do not however permit her to teach with the intent to dominate a man. She must be gentle in her demeanor.” Paul is opposed to any attempt to dominate and control the congregation so as to quench the work of the Spirit, whether that domination is attempted by men or by women.⁹

“...MANY OF THE PASSAGES employed to teach the universal subordination of women are not as clear-cut and straightforward as traditionally assumed. First Corinthians 11:3-16 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in particular are riddled with translational and hermeneutical ambiguities. Unless these texts can be shown unequivocally to be teaching what they traditionally have been understood to be teaching however, the hierarchalist view is on biblically shaky ground.”

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *The Feminist Bogeywoman* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 29.

Pernicious Notions

The Greek distrust of the body and passions has had a pernicious effect on Christianity. Throughout the history of the church, unhealthy forms of asceticism have repeatedly reared their ugly heads, raising doubts about the goodness of food and drink, of our sexuality and our bodies. This asceticism arises from the fear of freedom mentioned earlier, and specifically addressed by Paul in Galatians. What does this have to do with the subject of women’s roles in the church? While most who argue against women as pastors or leaders in the church do so from a so-called biblical basis, there is perhaps more to the opposition than rational objections. It is possible that much of the fear of women as pastors or leaders is not based on a conviction that women are incapable of teaching or leading. All of us could cite many examples of capable women leaders in church and society. Rather, the objections raised may not be as much rational as they are *visceral*. Lurking in our memories are those old notions of women

“THE CHURCH HAS HELD MANY WRONG IDEAS in its long history—ideas that are disavowed by the church today. For example, early in church history women were shunned as evil—‘the devil’s gateway,’ in the words of one church father (Tertullian)—and during the Middle Ages belief in this innate female evil led to an exaggerated fear of witchcraft among women. In fact, the supposed wickedness of women served as a primary rationale for their subjugation under men’s authority.”

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *The Feminist Bogeywoman* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 5.

as “impure” or “wanton” if they aspire to leadership, if they take a public role. This, as suggested in an earlier chapter, came not from Jesus or Paul, but from Aristotle and the Greeks!

Paul does not mince words: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected” (1 Timothy 4:1-4a).

The Old Testament is robust in asserting the goodness of God’s creation—of food, drink, and sexuality. Remember the great banquet of Isaiah with its wonderful food and wine? Remember the celebration of sexuality in the Song of Songs? How about Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 where the preacher recommends: “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life.” There is no note here of the sober asceticism that has persistently perverted Christianity in both Catholic and Protestant varieties.

Conclusion

Christ broke down those old walls of separation and uncleanness. It

is shameful, sinful to attempt to restore them because *all God's people are priests, all God's people are holy, and all God's people have the Spirit*. Women should be free to exercise their gifts in any way God calls them to. To deny them this freedom is to attempt to set up what Christ tore down.

For Discussion or Reflection

- 1) Can you discern the ways in which your church community reflects the “new” kingdom?
- 2) Can you discern any ways in which it does *not* reflect the new kingdom described above?
- 3) Can you come up with any suggestions for change?
- 4) When Paul addressed the Galatians, he told them they were rejecting “freedom” and taking up the “yoke of slavery.” Why is freedom a struggle? Have you ever experienced this in your own life? Have you seen this in the life of the church?
- 5) Do you *really* believe that in Christ race, class, and gender are not relevant? If so, what are the practical implications of that belief? If not, in what ways do you need to grow into that belief?
- 6) Continue to discuss the fear of freedom in relation to the roles of women in the church. Are people afraid of women in leadership positions? If so, why?
- 7) Can you cite a biblical text that shows that the Holy Spirit favors men over women in the distribution of spiritual gifts? (For the lists of gifts, refer to Romans 12:3-13; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28-30; and Ephesians 4:11-14).
- 8) What prevents both men and women from fully exercising their spiritual gifts?
- 9) How can your church help them to do so?
- 10) The Bible tells us about excellent women leaders in the early church. Think of women leaders from your own life and from the wider culture and society. Who are the most effective women leaders you have known? What makes them good leaders?

Recommended Reading

Bauckham, Richard. *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

Belleville, Linda L. "Exegetical Fallacies in Interpreting 1 Timothy 2:11-15," in *Priscilla Papers* (Summer 2003): 3-11.

_____. *Women Leaders in the Church: Three Crucial Questions*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.

Grenz, Stanley J., and Denise Muir Kjesbo. *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

Johnston, Robert, Jean Lambert, David Scholer, and Klyne Snodgrass. "A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry." An Occasional Paper, no. 1. Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1987.

Endnotes

¹For a more in-depth review of the Pauline passages that appear to restrict women's roles in the church see the *Called and Gifted Study Guide* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005).

²See Acts 2:16-18.

³Robert Johnston, Jean Lambert, David Scholer, and Klyne Snodgrass. "A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry." An Occasional Paper, no. 1 (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1987): 2-3.

⁴Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 198.

⁵*Ibid.*, 198.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸See especially Johnston; Grenz and Kjesbo; various articles in *Priscilla Papers*, Summer, 2003; and the *Called and Gifted Study Guide*.

⁹Linda L. Belleville, "Exegetical Fallacies in Interpreting 1 Timothy 2:11-15" in *Priscilla Papers*, Summer 2003. A longer form of her argument is found in her book, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

CHAPTER SIX

Ordination and Pastoral Ministry

When people talk about the subject of women's roles in the church, they frequently start the discussion with those few specific Pauline texts that can appear to restrict women's roles. In this study, however, we looked instead at the big picture—the whole scope of God's plans and intentions for the humans he created and loves so much. In the previous chapters we covered this larger story—the story of the promised restoration and what would constitute that restoration. In this final chapter we bring this larger story to one of its logical conclusions as it pertains to the role of women in the church today. We discuss specifically the idea of ordination, what it means, and whether women can or should be ordained for pastoral ministry. After presenting the big story in the preceding chapters, this chapter presents the following conclusions:

- The Bible does not prohibit women from serving in pastoral roles.
- We don't ordain women because we *can*, but rather because in order to fulfill the great commission, we *must*.
- We must encourage the exercise of all spiritual gifts by all people for the furtherance of the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The New Testament makes it clear that ministry belongs to all the people of God. The special gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher were given, according to Paul, “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12). The notion of “the priesthood of every believer” is widely accepted in Protestant churches. For example, in its rules for the ordered ministry the Evangelical Covenant Church maintains, “the mission [of the church] belongs not just to the ordained, commissioned, licensed, and consecrated persons, but to the whole church as a priesthood of believers.”¹ In this chapter, we will study the fact that the “special gifts” are not intended to elevate one group of people above another, but to provide a means by which the ministry of the whole may be accomplished. “When believers, corporately or individually, are called into the service of the Triune God, letting their words and actions bear witness to God’s redemptive act, the essential ministry is being performed.”² *All God’s people are priests.*

We will also see in this chapter that ministry is not just about office, identity, or authority but also about *mission*. The purpose of the *ordained* ministry is to enable God’s people to further God’s kingdom rule by proclaiming and living the gospel; that is, in Jesus’ words, “good news to the poor. . . . release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Ministry is in the service of the Spirit who calls and enables people for ministry and then raises up leaders to prepare, coordinate, and direct these ministries (1 Corinthians 12:4-13, 27-31; Ephesians 4:7-16). *All God’s people have the Spirit.* All are gifted for ministry. No one is left out or exempted.

But what about those “special gifts”? How did the concept of “ordained” ministry develop in the New Testament? Did women receive these gifts? Can women be “ordained”? Those are good questions and the material in this chapter responds to those questions.

In Preparation Read

- Mark 10:35-45
- Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 14:21-28

- Romans 16:1-23
- Ephesians 4:1-16
- 1 Timothy 3:1-13

Ministry and Leadership in the New Testament

The New Testament bears witness to the formative period of the church. The terms and functions of ministry appear to be fluid. There is some question as to whether one can even speak of the office of ordained ministry in the New Testament. Certainly the New Testament does not support the hardened categories of clergy and lay that mark most denominations and congregations today. The church was not yet an institution. It was more of a movement or an association. The gifts and calling of the Spirit were more important than any title.

“THE PRACTICE OF ORDAINING select people to hold positions of authority in churches should be viewed as an ecclesiastical tradition rather than as a biblical prescription.... Since the institution of ordination is traditional rather than biblically prescribed, there can be no valid objection raised on scriptural grounds to women being ordained. According to the New Testament, all believers, without exception, are ordained by God to do ministry on the basis of their spiritual gifts.”

Gilbert Bilezikian, “Challenge #9: A Challenge for Proponents of Female Subordination to Prove Their Case from the Bible,” at www.cbeinternational.org.

Early leadership structures, no doubt, were drawn from culturally familiar patterns of leadership. Among the important words used of early leaders are “elder” and “bishop.” “Elder” was a term used of leaders in both Jewish and early Christian congregations. “Bishop” can also be translated “overseer.” In Philippians 1:1 Paul addresses his letter “to all the saints in Jesus Christ who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” Bishop is also used in 1 Timothy 3. In Acts 20:17 Paul “sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him.” In Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas met with the new believers and “appointed elders for them in each church” (v. 23). This would suggest these terms are interchangeable.

The terms “bishop” and “elder” seem to entail a supervisory role. Paul had used the term “bishop” or “overseer” when he warned the Ephesian elders to “keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28). Elders/bishops were guardians and guides of the house churches, and they were entrusted to keep these churches faithful to God.

Did women function as elders and bishops? It seems entirely likely that they did. In the previous chapter we noted a number of women who were evidently leaders of house churches (Lydia, Prisca, Nympha, etc.). Spirit-ed giftedness was more important than gender at this stage of the church’s life.

The New Testament implies that there was more to the work of an elder or bishop than just overseeing. Stanley Grenz argues, “The New Testament writers clearly indicate that church structure is always subservient to mission. Central to the task of completing the work of the church is the giftedness of God’s people. Ministry occurs as all persons use their Spirit-endowed gifts to carry out the mandate Christ has entrusted to the entire fellowship.”³ In addition to the task of being the guardians and guides of the young congregations, elders/bishops were entrusted with enabling and directing the *mission* of the church.

What were the qualifications and gifts required for this high calling? The qualities of a bishop in 1 Timothy 3 are personal and managerial. The bishop is “temperate, sensible, respectful, hospitable, an apt teacher.” The bishop also must “manage” or “care for” both household and congregation well. Ultimately, the congregation does not “belong” to the bishop but to God. In Titus 1:7 the bishop is called God’s “steward.” A steward is someone who manages the affairs of another. The bishop holds the congregation as a trust from God.

In 1 Peter 5 the elder is described as an “under shepherd” who cares for the flock on behalf of the “chief shepherd” or the owner of the flock. It seems clear that both men and women could be well-equipped to carry out these tasks. Both men and women could have the personal and spiritual qualities necessary. Women in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds were used to managing and caring for a household. They were also accustomed

“...FITNESS FOR MINISTRY in the church consists in the possession of a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit. . . . the Spirit bestows His gifts upon each one severally as He will. If the Holy Spirit bestows upon some woman a gift in the ministry of the Word, no ecclesiastical organization has any right to prevent her exercising that gift, and there certainly ought to be room in our churches for the exercise of every gift bestowed by the Head of the church through the Spirit, without reference to nationality, social position, or sex, for these things are abolished in Christ.”

G. Campbell Morgan, *This Was His Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 119-20.

to being good stewards of what was not theirs.

In fact, there are some ways women in that culture were perhaps better equipped to care for local congregations. Both Peter and Paul suggest leadership is to be exercised with gentleness, compassion, and generosity. Paul, using a wonderful female image for his ministry, reminded the Thessalonians that he was “gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

Later in this chapter we will explore what Jesus and Paul taught about authority in the church. We will see that the notion of a typically male top-down administration was foreign to the New Testament.

Another important term in the New Testament is “deacon.” The word is also translated “servant” or “minister.” Acts 6 is often viewed as the beginning of the ministry of deacons. There the apostles seem to distinguish between the “service of the word” and the “service of tables.” When the practical ministry of the early church was failing part of the community, it appointed six deacons (the word is not used as a title in Acts 6) to make sure this practical ministry was done fairly and well. But nowhere does it say that the ministry of a *deacon* is limited to practical service. In addition to his duties as a deacon, Stephen was an able evangelist, apologist, and preacher and in the process becomes Christianity’s first martyr (Acts 7).

The qualifications of deacons listed in 1 Timothy are quite similar to those of the bishop. Personal qualities loom large (“serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy,” etc.) as well as

oversight and administrative skills (managing their family well). First Timothy 3:11 could be translated to suggest there was an order of female deacons. Certainly the term is used elsewhere of women (e.g., Romans 16:10). Deaconesses are also mentioned in early Christian and even pagan literature. The specific ministry of deacons is not made clear, although it is obvious from the similarity in qualifications that it would be dangerous to make their role substantially different from bishop or elder. The terms were still quite fluid in the early church.

Paul's Vision of the Church

How are the spiritual gifts to function in the church? How do the special gifts help the Spirit's gifts to be used well? Paul seems to envision the church as a community of persons possessing multiple gifts of the Spirit, and freely exercising those gifts to carry out the mission of the church. This exercise of gifts could be spiritually powerful or unnecessarily chaotic! Paul was pleased that the Corinthian church was "not lacking in any spiritual gift" (1 Corinthians 1:7), but he was not always happy with the way those gifts were used! The worship services had evidently become a bit rowdy in Corinth. Paul did not want to limit the exercise of the congregation's gifts, but insisted that all things should be done for building up the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:26). Paul was quite concerned about the *mission* of the Corinthian church. He feared an outsider visiting one of their gatherings would think they were "out of their minds." Paul wanted everything done "decently and in order," not because he was a control freak, but because otherwise God's mission was compromised. If the services were disorderly, the church would not be built up, and outsiders and unbelievers might not be reached.

It seems clear that the house churches of Corinth were exciting and interesting places. All kinds of people were exercising their gifts. "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" (1 Corinthians 14:26). Paul was not making an accusation here; he was stating a fact. He was not necessarily criticizing them but rather warning them that in their exuberance they must remember good order. When all God's people have the Spirit, all God's people are gifted

“THE ORGANIZATION of the Christian community is never described as a gender-based hierarchy in the Scriptures. To the contrary, it is the doctrine of the community of oneness that sets the norm (Matthew 19:4-6; John 17:11, 20-23; Acts 4:32; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14; Ephesians 4:4-6; etc.). . . . The Scripture absolutely forbids racial, class, and gender discrimination by reason of the oneness of the church as a body. This oneness is consistently defined in the New Testament as full participation of the total constituency in the ministries of the church. This and other teachings of Scripture rule out gender-based hierarchy as a structure for biblical oneness.”

Gilbert Bilezikian. “Challenge #9: A Challenge for Proponents of Female Subordination to Prove Their Case from the Bible,” at www.cbeinternational.org.

and called to use those gifts. Elders and deacons were no doubt concerned with the directing and disciplining of those gifts. Paul did not want to eliminate even the most dangerous and frequently abused gift—tongues. He just wanted to make sure that even the gift of tongues was used for edification and mission.

For Paul, the gifts of God in the church were ultimately for the purpose of producing “the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God,” and “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). The gifts, even the most significant leadership gifts (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor-teacher), only exist as a means to an end—the production of maturity and Christ-likeness. Every believer, male and female, is given the mission to imitate Christ. Every believer, male and female, is to “follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). Every believer exists “in Christ,” where there is no “Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

In the New Testament era, elders, bishops, and deacons exercised their leadership to produce mature followers of Christ who would continue his kingdom mission.

Authority or Authoritarian?

How is this leadership to be exercised? It is very clear that both Jesus

and Paul present a new vision for the exercise of leadership. Jesus was quite explicit about this, to the chagrin and frustration of his disciples. In Mark 10:35-45 Jesus reacted to James and John's attempt to secure thrones to the left and right of Jesus in his kingdom. He told them and the other disciples that his order of leadership is based on an entirely different model than they are familiar with. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you" (vv. 42-43). The disciples knew their world's model of leadership very well. It was clearly "top down"—lording it over, acting as a tyrant. Fear and violence were the order of the day. But Jesus offered a completely different model. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (vv. 43-44).

Jesus inverted the pyramid! He put the leaders at the bottom rather than at the top. Over the centuries the church has acknowledged and then pretty much ignored this model of leadership. Some church leaders, from medieval popes to denominational executives to contemporary mega-church pastors, have smilingly turned away from meaningful servanthood. It is as if they think Jesus was naïve! You can't really run a church that way! Turning from the servanthood model to the royal model or the managerial model has perhaps been the greatest failure of the church. It seems that getting things done has become more important than faithfulness.

Peter echoes his master in his first letter. "As an elder myself," he writes, "I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge but be examples to the flock." A few lines later he tells them, "all of you must clothe yourself with humility in your dealings with one another" (1 Peter 5:1-5). Jesus was nothing if not a strong leader. There is no suggestion here, in his case or that of Paul or Peter that a leader is weak. Nevertheless, it is clear that a leader does not seek to control and dominate. Rather the leader loves, supports, persuades, and leads by personal example. Even Jesus was willing to wash the feet of his disciples.

It is dangerous to say which personal qualities are uniquely male or female. Both men and women can be caring and nurturing. Both men and women can be rational and controlled. Both men and women can work through networks and cooperation, and both can seek to dominate and control from the top. But it is interesting that the method of leadership recommended by the New Testament is more often identified in our culture with the way *women* lead—nurturing, persuading, cooperating, and coming alongside. This would suggest that male leaders have a lot to learn from the leadership methods of women! It also suggests that the leadership qualities most often recognized in women are those critically needed these days in the church.

The Calling Forth of Leadership

Leaders are called by the common effort of the Spirit and the community. In Acts 6 the complaint of the Hellenists leads the apostles to call together the whole community. As a result, the community chose deacons, who were called to address these complaints. The community chose them on the basis of recognized spiritual gifts and personal qualities. Once they were identified and selected by the community the apostles “prayed and laid their hands on them.” The prayer and laying-on of hands amounted

“SIGNIFICANTLY, while the word ‘ordination’ may be absent from the biblical vocabulary, the Scriptures are replete with instances describing the process of God’s election. Anointing was a means by which God’s people acknowledged a divine appointment. In the Old Testament, in obedience to God, Israel poured olive oil on the heads of prophets, priests and kings. In the New Testament, churches prayed and laid hands on individuals whom God had called. . . . Regardless of the mode of human confirmation, the divine pattern remains the same. The initiative and the authority to choose workers reside with God. It is God who calls people into ministry. We participate by confirming the decision and celebrating God’s wisdom.”

Grace Ying May and Hyunhye Pokrifka Joe, “Setting the Record Straight: A Response to J.I. Packer’s Position on Women’s Ordination,” *Priscilla Papers*, 11:1 (Winter 1997): 8.

to both a commissioning and an identification.

A similar process occurred in Acts 13. A number of prophets and teachers, among them Barnabas and Saul, served the church at Antioch. In the midst of their worship, the Spirit, perhaps through a prophet, said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (v. 2). This work would become Paul’s first missionary journey. Interestingly, the church “fasted and prayed” before acting. Only after the whole church was sure of the Spirit’s commission did they “lay hands on them and send them off.”

It would be foolish to attempt to extract an exact procedure for calling out, identifying, and ordaining or recognizing leaders from these few verses. Nevertheless, these verses suggest some important principles:

1) The ministry and worship of the church is the context for calling forth leadership for God’s work. In both cases mentioned above, the “church,” God’s people, selected leaders who were already part of the ministry of God’s people. The “deacons” were obviously already recognized leaders and Barnabas and Saul were included in the prophets and teachers of Antioch.

2) The Spirit works through the people to recognize and call forth leaders. This is seen not only in the book of Acts but also in 1 Timothy 4 where Paul reminds Timothy that he received his gift “through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.” Once again it was the Spirit and the community working together to call forth and recognize gifts.

3) Paul as an apostle also appointed and encouraged the appointment of leaders for congregations (Acts 14:21-23). He did not want these congregations to be bereft of leadership. This does not suggest he chose these leaders unilaterally, in a top down way. Doubtless he worked with the local congregation to select those leaders. And, while the church bore witness to Timothy’s gifts and calling, Paul still had a significant role in recognizing and developing those gifts (2 Timothy 1:6-7; Acts 16:1-3).

Local congregations have a huge role in recognizing, encouraging, and sending out women and men for the ministry and mission of the church. The Spirit aids congregations in this task of recognizing and calling indi-

viduals. Congregations must learn to trust their own strengths and gifts. God has set down gifted men and women in every congregation to serve him and the kingdom. Because women have so frequently been overlooked for certain roles within the church, women especially need the encouragement and support of local congregations to respond to God's call.

EVANGELIST PHOEBE PALMER (1807-74) declared, "I have not a slight apprehension that God has called me to stand before the people and proclaim His truth... and so truly has He set His seal upon it... in the conversion of thousands of precious souls... that even Satan does not seem to question that my call is divine..."

Phoebe Palmer, *Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 312.

Training and Preparation

From what was said above it is obvious that training and preparation for ministry begins in the local congregation. Churches themselves have a role in preparing the next generation of bishops and deacons, apostles and prophets, teachers and preachers. But individuals also have a role. For example, Lois (Timothy's grandmother) and Eunice (Timothy's mother) prepared Timothy for his call (2 Timothy 1:5).

In addition there was the "Seminary of St. Paul." The apostle provided mentoring and teaching for many of his co-workers, male and female. Paul's evangelism and church planting apparently involved the creation of teams. From an urban center like Corinth or Ephesus, members of one of Paul's teams would go to surrounding towns to proclaim the good news and plant churches. Paul seems to have stayed in the urban center teaching and preaching and preparing additional disciples to carry out the mission of the church. In Corinth he evidently used the house of Titus Justus for his ministry and in Ephesus he used the "lecture hall of Tyrannus" (Acts 18:7 and 19:8-10). In these places, Paul the teacher prepared the next generation of Christian leaders by modeling the ministry and teaching the word of God.

All this suggests that there was more to the call and exercise of ministry

than just the receiving of gifts. Those gifts needed to be developed and exercised. There was nothing automatic about them. Paul's letters can be seen as a part of his ongoing teaching and preparation of leaders. Their theological and practical natures make it clear that Paul was neither abstractly theological nor strictly pragmatic. Theology gave shape to practice, and practice followed theology. Good theology produced good practice and vice versa! To the end, Paul was a teacher and mentor who called his co-workers, female and male, to an imitation of his passion.

Conclusion

Ordained ministry is not about gender. It is not about any individualistic perception of call and gift. It is about the church listening to the Spirit, calling forth its own gifted members, and joining their call to that of the Spirit. The laying on of hands does not turn the ordained person into a "third sex." It does not put them into an alternative human category. It is, rather, the church's way of recognizing that while all God's people are priests, some are called to make sure all those spiritually gifted "priests" use their gifts for the furtherance of God's kingdom. Some are made "servants of the servants of God"—not to exercise power from the top, but to demonstrate servanthood from the bottom.

For Discussion or Reflection

- 1) What is the difference between an office and a function?
- 2) How are leaders and pastors selected in your congregation? Are you familiar with your church's constitution? Where is the work of the Holy Spirit in the process? How is the community involved in the process?
- 3) If your church is a part of a denomination, are you familiar with the denomination's policy on selecting leaders and pastors? A good question to explore is if your church's policy is consistent with the denomination's policy. If you think it isn't, reflect on what needs to be done to align the two.
- 4) If you are studying this in a group, and if your group is comprised of members from various backgrounds, ask each other about the policies

of the various churches and denominations represented. What types of leaders do they have? Elders? Bishops? Deacons? Council members? How does the church govern itself and what kind of leadership teams does it have? What authority do these leadership teams have? Is the selection of a pastor done by the congregation or by an outside authority? (Note: the Internet is a fast and easy way to search for this kind of information.)

- 5) What is good about an institution?
- 6) What is dangerous about institutionalism?
- 7) How can your church(es) more fully live out the vision of women's pastoral leadership?

Recommended Reading

Anderson, Isolde. "Two Decades Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977-1997)." *The Covenant Quarterly* LVI, no. 3 (August 1998): 19-36.

Evangelical Covenant Church. *The Covenant Book of Worship*. Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003.

Grenz, Stanley J., and Denise Muir Kjesbo. *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

Hull, Gretchen Gaebelein. *Equal to Serve*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987, 1991.

Miller, Mary C. "A Decade Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977-1987)." *The Covenant Quarterly* XLVI, no. 4 (November 1988): 6-26.

Phelan, John E. "An Honest Column." *Priscilla Papers*, Spring 2002.

Snodgrass, Klyne R. "The Ordination of Women—Thirteen Years Later: Do We Really Value the Ministry of Women?" *The Covenant Quarterly* XLVIII, no. 3 (August 1990): 26-43.

Endnotes

¹ Evangelical Covenant Church. *The Covenant Book of Worship* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 397.

² *Ibid.*, 397-98

³ Stanley J. Grenz, and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 215.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most important trajectory in the Bible is the trajectory of liberation. The Bible moves from the story of the enslavement and banishment of Adam and Eve in the garden to the salvation and liberation of all God's daughters and sons in the kingdom of God. The story of enslavement and liberation is re-enacted over and over again in the biblical narrative. Joseph is liberated from prison to Pharaoh's right hand and effects the liberation of his family from famine. Moses leads the children of Israel from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. The judges deliver faithless Israel over and over again from various oppressors. King David frees them from the iron-fisted power of the Philistines. And so it goes.

But it is Jesus who effects the most dramatic and complete liberation. In his death and resurrection he defeats the oppressive power of sin and death and offers freedom to everyone. "When you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh," Paul wrote the Colossians, "God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians

Conclusion

2:13-15). Jesus makes a radical new kingdom available—a kingdom where all God’s people are priests, all God’s people are holy, and all God’s people have the Spirit. In this new kingdom, traditions concerning social standing, racial categories, and gender roles are rendered obsolete. The cross calls into question all social and religious hierarchies.

All this suggests that attempts to prohibit women from exercising their gifts of ministry by serving as pastors and teachers in the church are violations of the gospel and affronts to the kingdom of God. Keeping women from exercising their gifts is a contemporary example of quenching the Spirit’s fire and, more seriously, is perhaps even blasphemy against the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19; Mark 3:28-29).

The handful of difficult passages that may be read to suggest women should not inhabit pastoral roles must be read in terms of this trajectory of liberation and the promise of God’s kingdom. This study was written with the hope that God’s liberating purposes will be fully realized in the Church of Jesus Christ. All God’s people are priests. All God’s people are holy. All God’s people do have the Spirit. And all of them should be set free to be grown up sons and daughters of the kingdom using their gifts for God’s glory.