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The Route to Unity amidst Gender Inequality in the Church

“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.

And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

1 Corinthians 14:34&35

Gender inequality seems to be an inescapable injustice. It has existed all throughout history and still causes major division in the modern world. Discrimination towards women is seen in business, social interactions, the workplace, and even in the most sacred of realms- the Church. The place that claims acceptance and inclusivity can be the very place many people are most injured by exclusion. Due to some Biblical passages such as the one above, many Christians believe women were created by God as inferior to men, which has led to male dominance in ministry and liturgical leadership. Gender inequality in the Church is an issue that deserves our time and thoughtful consideration as Christians. The imbalance that exists in this area weakens the church body and is detrimental to the unity of the Church. Despite many common arguments for male superiority in ministry, a deeper look at scripture levels the field of ministry for both men and women. Without denying, ignoring, or discounting any scripture, the

Church can be unified by allowing (or rather, encouraging) both men and women to serve the Lord in all areas of ministry, regardless of gender or social expectations.

Identifying the Problem: Unity

The Christian Church is called to be unified. This much is widely agreed upon. As the Body of Christ, the Church is meant to function as one multi-faceted organism with a common goal (Padilla). Different areas of the Body can have unique purposes and duties, but they are not for the sake of the individual; these different purposes are always for the sake of the Church as a whole, and therefore they work towards one goal. As the Holy Trinity is one entity made of three, similarly the Church is one entity composed of multiple pieces. Many aspects are at work here- each individual interacts with the Triune God personally and within community; each community of believers functions within themselves; and these communities interact together as the whole Church and Body of Christ. Despite the commonly recognized call to unity, divisions remain throughout the Church. Differing denominations, tense competition between congregations, and exclusivity within gatherings have left Christians rather disarrayed and quite far from unified. Divisions weaken the body because they pull the focus away from serving God, reposition it onto the status of the individual Christian, and create tension between believers.

Gender has become an area focused on status. Leadership is often made exclusive to males, which reinforces an attitude towards women that is unhelpful to the unity, health, and inseparably, the efficacy of the church. When the Church is divided, its role of glorifying God becomes quite difficult. How can the Church bring the inclusive Kingdom of God and the universal message of the gospel, when the Church Body itself denies these things in its division and exclusivity?

The church has a history of dividing itself by limiting women and men to certain roles. To put it broadly, culture has encouraged the idea that women are naturally inclined to excel in positions of tangible service, while men are more naturally successful in leadership positions (Hall). Society has come to accept that the leading “masculine” roles are more desirable and of a higher status. Because of this notion, basic modern ideas of equality involve increasing the availability of leadership roles to women, but they often neglect the significance of service roles for men. Societal expectations keep the Church from reaching its potential by restricting its members to certain areas of service. Through the cross Christ made equality and unity available to all, but Christians continue to refuse those gifts by allowing divisions to play a role in worship.

At some point in Western history, gender became a kind of “virtue” (DeFranza). The history and progression of attitude towards women can be traced back much earlier than the formation of the church. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle explored gender differences with beliefs that, unlike men, all women lacked the mental capacity for sound rationality, and therefore were incapable of attaining virtue. Women were considered less competent in mind, body, and morality. Cultural assumptions of masculinity and femininity have attached certain virtues and vices to gender. Manliness became tied to virtuousness, esteeming men superior to women. Humans set out on a pursuit for perfection, but they themselves labeled the goal as masculinity. It is clear how this understanding would lead to a distrust for women in responsible leadership positions. Through the Reformation and Victorian Revolution, some level of virtue was attributed to women for their caring and running of the household and raising of children. These decidedly feminine virtues excluded women from leadership and public influence, as they were only valued in the privacy of homemaking. (DeFranza) Such associations continue to

prevent true equality between the sexes. The Church suffers deeply from these patterns in which it participates. Even with pure and decent intentions, by cutting off more than half of the congregation from leading and preaching makes way for massive disunity (James) and feeds falsehoods throughout the Church.

Pursuing the Truth: Scriptural Exploration

Virtually all churches, whether they claim opposition to or support of female leadership in ministry, use the Bible to justify their position on the topic. At a surface level, scripture can seem to be quite self-contradictive concerning the gender roles, and particularly women in the church setting. Christians cannot be too cautious in interpreting these areas of scripture, especially when the freedom of a large portion of the church depends upon it. Society has instilled into its members assumptions of inequality which prove to be less than helpful in the shaping of the church through an understanding of the Bible. To help break away from such assumptions, one must understand that controversial passages require particularly careful reading, understanding of the culture, and knowledge of the surrounding circumstance: the purpose for writing, the original audience, and an understanding of the author.

This section will examine several scriptural texts concerning gender roles, and hopefully provide a new light in which to view them. The Pauline epistles offer a significant amount of work in the area of gender roles, but they also prove to be a bit contradictive, considering they have a common author. However, the fact that these contradictive texts come from the same author can be seen as source of encouragement. Having authored over half of the books of the New Testament, Paul is typically a very trusted source among Christians, and many have modeled their theology and the practices of the church after his writings. A look at Paul's life, cultural context, and writing style can help to clear up a good deal of the ambiguity existing

among these texts. Karen M. Elliott offers thorough work in this area in her book *Women in Ministry and the Writings of Paul*. Elliott argues for an egalitarian aspect to Paul's beliefs, as his writings emphasize his respect for women through the frequent indication of leadership positions held by women in the Christian community and his references to women as equals. Many of the texts that are (understandably) poorly interpreted are considered by scholars to be deutro-pauline texts. Elliott's method of interpretation allows a different perspective on passages such as 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35.

“In every place of worship, I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up to God, free from anger and controversy. And I want women to be modest in their appearance. They should wear decent clothing and not draw attention to themselves by the way they fix their hair or by wearing gold or pearls or expensive clothes. For women who claim to be devoted to God should make themselves attractive by the good things they do. Women should learn quietly and submissively. I do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly. For God made Adam first, and afterward He made Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived by Satan. The woman was deceived, and sin was the result. But women will be saved through childbearing, assuming they continue to live in faith, love, holiness, and modesty.” (1 Timothy 2: 8-15)

The clear contrast of this passage to the majority of Paul's writings has led most biblical scholars to the agreement that this was not written by Paul himself, but rather by his followers after his death. The imagery of a quiet, submissive, unproductive woman does not seem to fit with Paul's consistent indications of his support for female leadership through his use of feminine imagery, references to female leaders in his letters, and his argument that women are

also given gifts to share with the congregation. It is important to note that Paul's references to women like Chloe, Apphia, Phoebe, and others, do not belittle women in any way because of their gender or position. The terms Paul uses to describe them are gender-inclusive. He does not specify a difference of role by referring to Phoebe as a "deaconess" but rather sticks to the term "deacon." (Elliott) This seems to leave very little room for debate over Paul's opinion of women in church leadership. However, texts such as the one above have been poorly interpreted by many Christians. When this sort of text is viewed apart from contextual understanding, and is applied without the rest of Paul's teachings, the Church finds itself justified in gender inequality. This text is easy for our society to interpret literally, because it supports much of the cultural gender roles that history has formed. However, the long-standing historical background of these assumptions does not make them correct. (Hall) In his commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, Thomas C. Oden offers an interpretation of the text with regard to its originally intended audience, the church in Ephesus. It is likely that the author was addressing certain issues specific to that particular church. Perhaps certain members of the church in Ephesus had a record of being especially loud or distracting, for instance. Oden also argues for an uncommon understanding of the portion about not allowing women to teach men. The word used in the original text translates to "I permit" and signifies an expression of personal preference or opinion. Oden then says that the author is not demanding this as law, but is more likely referring to a particular situation in which the author himself chose not to allow women to rule over men. Further, the text specifies this to be a form of ruling that intends to dictate or usurp authority that has already been established (in this case, the authority of certain men). (Oden) This is an issue that repeatedly manifests in translations. Certain words and tenses in the Greek language do not translate well into the English language. Moreover, the many translations of the English Bible

often alter the meaning in subtle ways. Interpretation of scripture has truly become a risky task. One individual's understanding of a text in the NIV Bible can actually be thought of as an interpretation of many layers of former interpretations and translations.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 communicates a very similar message to 1 Timothy 2:8-15, and should be similarly interpreted.

“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.

And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Verses 34 and 35 seem to stand out from the surrounding text, and once again do not seem to reflect Paul's inclusive view of gender roles in the Church. Just a few chapters earlier, the text implies that both men and women can prophesy. Many plausible (or not-so-plausible) explanations are offered for this. Some say that the author here was not Paul, that these verses were added later, or that the author was addressing a local problem within the church at Corinth. This passage is commonly used to prevent women from preaching, but many argue that Paul never demanded that women remain silent in church. This position stems from the belief that Paul is not the author of these texts, or that they have been poorly interpreted. If Paul is not the author of these texts, it is possible that portions of them were added to manuscripts later. These addendums may have behind them personal or political intentions. In this very chapter, the author emphasizes the importance of the message content, implying that the message being given should be more of a concern than the messenger preaching it. A larger theme of 1 Corinthians

chapter 14 also encourages the building of community in worship among believers, which involves the sharing and interaction of *all* members. (Hays)

Both of these texts are widely used to justify the enduring gender exclusivity in the Church; but, other passages nearby clearly empower both men and women, and place them on an even level of interaction. A look at 1 Corinthians 11 and Galatians 3 reveals a theme that emphasizes God's ability to supersede societal expectations.

“Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.

For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.” (1 Corinthians 11: 11-12)

While the author acknowledges differences between men and women in chapter 11, he clearly marks a reciprocal relationship that equally requires both parties. Even as his Greco-Roman influence reveals itself in his reference to the husband being the head of the wife, Paul still insists upon the necessity of mutual respect and responsibility in a marriage. (Elliott) This is implied consistently throughout 1 Corinthians. Chapter seven of the first letter to the Corinthians instructs husbands and wives to love and submit to one another. These instructions are given equally for both parties, and do not encourage any sense of superiority to either sex. Chapter 11 describes man and woman as completing one another. The woman has just as much to offer as the man, and together they can function even more effectively. Such mutuality would have been rejected, and even punished, by Roman society in that time. Paul, however, recognizes that God is larger than societal expectations, and the unity He provides bridges all differences.

“For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 26-28)

Paul also recognizes Christ’s power to supersede cultural expectations and assumptions through the practice of baptism. In the above text, Paul encourages baptism for believers and claims that through this, unity in Christ can be found. Considering Paul’s cultural setting and upbringing, this is a bold statement. This is a passage that should be considered in the Church’s decisions concerning the role of women in ministry. The act of baptism, which all followers of Christ are commanded to do, is a unifying and equalizing experience. How can a church body be baptized in Christ and justify gender inequality in ministry?

Despite continual disagreements, arguments for the unrestricted inclusion of women in ministry fit well with the universal gospel of Jesus as a whole. Part of the responsibility of the Body of Christ is to bring the gospel to the world through our actions, but an improper interpretation of these seemingly exclusive scriptures prevents the most complete achievement of that responsibility.

Interpretation of Scripture within the Context of the Gospel: Reconciliation

“And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.” (Matthew 5: 2-11)

Scripture is most appropriately interpreted when it is seen in the light of the gospel. The work done on the cross provides possibility for reconciliation and equality. Since contradictions can be found throughout the Bible, it is helpful to understand scripture from the inclusive good news of the gospel that offers love and equality. The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7, offers a beautiful definition of the gospel. In the short portion of the sermon quoted above, Jesus teaches his disciples to think beyond the constraints of societal demands. He teaches that the poor, the meek, the persecuted, and the sorrowful are blessed, and thus are to be considered no less than others. Through this, Jesus effectively communicates a message of inclusivity that helps to unite the individuals that make up the Body of Christ as the Church. Our interpretation of scripture should be steeped in Christ's gospel that uses the least of these to do great things. The Church should not be shaped so rigidly by societal standards and expectations, but rather ought to exist in a space within culture that resists culture's constraints. The Church should be a space where all can find refuge and purpose and empowerment through Christ. (Katongole) A

method of interpretation that stands within the acknowledgment and adherence to the whole gospel is a primary piece of reconciliation in the Church and worship. In order to be the Body of Christ, the Church must be unified as one mind, and an inclusive understanding of scripture may allow that to happen.

The church can begin to remove walls of inequality by allowing women to hold pastoral roles and leadership positions. The understanding of scripture within Jesus' inclusive gospel message makes plenty of room for this sort of equality. Our culture tells women a story of inferiority when they are only able to experience the church from one side. A reconciling interpretation reveals that such a narrative is something formed by culture- not the Word of God. Society has tried to make exclusive what was intended to be inclusive. When females preach, Christians- both male and female- are pushed to further examine the biblical passages that initially seem to restrict women from such work. The members of the congregation grow spiritually when both men and women participate in the church from the pew as well as the pulpit. This allows men and women to view each other as equals, and properly worship God as a reconciled people. Adequate reconciliation is prevented by any existing inequalities or prejudices, and these must be done away with in order to worship in community. When women preach, the planes are leveled, and women find the courage and support needed to speak up in ways they did not feel entitled to before. (Leach) Women can glorify God in preaching just as effectively as men. The church should not prevent women from involvement in all areas of the church, but should instead be building them up in confidence, enabling them to best fulfill their calling to serve the Lord- even if that means preaching. Rather than allowing society to restrict service and work in the Kingdom, the church as a whole needs to support its brothers and sisters in using their gifts and abilities to better the Kingdom, minister to one another, and reach out to

those outside the church. Reconciliation will improve the efficacy of the Church in its role of being a living gospel in the world. The most effective and often impactful organizations work as a team, and consider each member to be an equally important asset, even though what each person has to offer may be different. In fact, a variety of skills and abilities is preferable and necessary in any team, including the Body of Christ. By allowing both men and women to hold positions of leadership and service equally, the Church can take advantage of the fullness its congregation has to offer to the Kingdom of God. Reconciled believers make a strong Church body, and the route to a united, reconciled Church is equality. This equality will not be content to only be considered, or discussed; it must be practiced. Reconciliation does not come without effort from all parties involved. In order to counteract the cultural implications that have been successfully working their way into the minds of individuals and the shape of the Church, congregations will need to make a conscious effort to increase female leadership in the liturgy. The Church would do well to begin to set a precedent of both male and female leadership for the next generation to see as an example. Active effort to bring more women into various leadership roles will strengthen the Body now, as well as in the future. Doing so would challenge the false cultural regulations society has pressed onto the Church and its members, as well as create a healthier paradigm for the children growing up in the Church. The work done to remove inequalities and prejudice now, is work that will lead the future of the Church down a road of real reconciliation. If we refuse to allow the issue of gender inequality in the Church to be swept under the rug any longer, then perhaps one day soon it will no longer be an issue needing recovery. Although it will require change, through the gospel of Jesus Christ such radical reconciliation is a real possibility.

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