

WHAT TO DO WHILE WE'RE WAITING FOR PERFECT UNDERSTANDING: WHY WE NEED A THEOLOGY OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY

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Why another Workshop on Women in Ministry?

This is the third time I have presented in a workshop dealing with women in ministry. Although the workshops have had different titles, they all come down to this question: May women participate in the same ministries of the church as men do, or are there some ministries that should be restricted to men only? To come straight to the point: May women serve as preachers and church elders, or not? That's what this workshop is really about. I need to say quite candidly that we have not made any remarkable new discoveries about the biblical text in the 30 years or so since I began studying and thinking about this question. As some of you know, nearly 120 years ago there was a two-year period of discussion and debate about women's preaching in the pages of the *Christian Standard* and most of the arguments, pro and con, that are made today were made then. I have thick files containing copies of hundreds of pages of articles that have appeared in the *Standard* in the intervening years and, again, there's nothing new under the sun. So why do we keep having this discussion? One reason is that, like the 16th-century Protestant Reformers, we have tended to believe and argue that all we need is the Bible to answer our questions about church organization and worship and leadership practices, but we haven't found in the Bible the cut-and-dried answers we would like. Neither did the Protestant Reformers, who ended up with a considerable variety of church structures and worship and leadership practices, all based on nothing but the Bible. I come to you with the firm conviction that the question whether certain ministries in the 21st-century church should be restricted to men only cannot be answered simply by quoting and explaining texts from the Bible.

This workshop is described in the program as offering two perspectives. Unfortunately, the conveners of the workshop were unable to secure any of the candidates they approached to present a perspective differing from my own. From the point of view of the audience the chief advantage of having only one presenter is that it will allow more time for questions, so here's what we will do in the 50 minutes or so that we have for the session. First, I will set out, very briefly, the two perspectives the conveners had in mind. Then I will lead us through some reflections on a text that I believe illustrates why it is so hard to answer this question simply by quoting scripture. I will then make some observations showing why we need to do critical theological thinking about women in ministry. I will then give over the remaining time, which should be about 20 minutes, to discussion with you.

I will call the first perspective on women in ministry The Restrictive Model, using "restrictive" not as a pejorative, but only to indicate that this model holds that women are restricted from being, let's just say for convenience, "preachers" and "elders." The vast majority of our congregations hold to this position. If you were to ask knowledgeable

leaders of these churches why they do not permit women to serve as preachers or elders they might give at least the following four reasons:

1. With remarkably few exceptions, most of the visible spiritual leaders of the people of God in both the OT and the NT (and in the subsequent history of the church) have been males (including most of the prophets, all of the apostles, and all of the elders in NT churches).
2. In two places Paul specifically forbids women from speaking out in an authoritative way or teaching men in a worship setting (1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12).
3. 1 Tim 3:3-5 gives instructions that an overseer (elder) is to be a man, specifically a faithfully-married man with at least one child.
4. Male leadership in general is seen to be a principle that runs throughout scripture, involving both the home and the church.

Knowledgeable leaders who have read some of the standard literature on the debate might go on to explain that they do not consider the many ministries that women *do* fulfill in their church to be inferior to those of men, but to be “complementary.” Within the standard literature on men and women in ministry “complementarian” has become the preferred self-designation for this group.

I will call the second perspective The Unrestrictive Model. A tiny minority of our churches—I have no idea how many—permit women to serve in any ministry capacity open to men. If you were to ask knowledgeable leaders of these churches why they do so they might give at least the following four reasons:

1. Even though the cultural context of both the OT and the NT was strongly patriarchal, nevertheless there were some women who were visible spiritual leaders, including some OT prophets, one Judge, and several of Paul’s associates in ministry, among whom were Phoebe, Prisca, Euodia, and Syntyche, to mention only a few.
2. Since Paul appears to have had female ministry associates, his forbidding women to speak authoritatively or teach men in worship must have been exceptional cases, involving specific local churches, rather than his general practice.
3. Paul’s description of church overseers in 1 Tim 3 is in keeping with the general patriarchal leadership of most groups and gatherings in the Roman world; but there is nothing specific to the function of elders that requires that they be males.
4. If women are unsuited for public, authoritative speaking leadership in the church, they are also unsuited for such leadership in society in general. However, in modern Western culture women are generally treated as equal to men, not simply “complementary” to them.

“Egalitarian” has become the preferred self-designation of this group.

Each group can marshal a number of biblical texts in support of their position, but each group will generally also acknowledge that there are some texts that support the other position, and there are still other texts that leave us so perplexed we don’t quite know what to do with them. Our hope is that one day, we will have perfect understanding (or at least better understanding). As I talk to people about this dilemma, I have the impression a lot of folks think that, since the “default” position has been mostly male

leadership in the church since its earliest days, the safest thing to do is to hold to that policy. Now, when it comes to those perplexing texts, maybe one of these days, we'll understand them better and then we can make a change if we need to.

Now, as a demonstration project, I want to take you through a text very quickly and show you that there is no "safe" position on this question, nor is there a position based on the Bible alone. The text I have selected is 1 Cor 11:2-16, which you have on the handout before you. I chose this text for two reasons: (1) For the most part, it has not been a "fighting text" among our people, at least for the last 30 years or so. (2) The text provides some support for both the "restrictive" and the "unrestrictive" positions, but it has so many exegetical difficulties, we will probably never have perfect understanding; so the question is: what are we supposed to do in the meantime? Let me lead you through it with some of the questions and observations it prompts from me (quick and dirty run through the text):

v. 3—Whatever the word "head" means here, this sounds like a hierarchical view of the relationship of males/females or, more probably husbands/wives. You could probably "score" one for the side that believes males take the lead.

vv. 4-5—It is all right for men *and* women to pray and prophesy. I take it from the context of this passage that Paul is referring to public worship and that "prophesying" is equivalent to what we would today call "preaching." Here you could probably score one for the unrestrictive view of ministry, *but* (and this is *very important* to Paul), both males and females must be careful to observe a strict dress code with regard to head coverings when they are leading in worship..

vv. 6-7—These verses make it clear that not only head-coverings but hair length is at issue, but we can't be sure exactly why. In v. 7 how does a man who covers his head during worship somehow endanger his status as "the image and glory" of God? And why is the woman said to be "the glory" of man, but not the "image" of man? Again, the verse sounds like it underwrites a male/female hierarchy, but did Paul not believe women were also created in the image and glory of God?

vv. 8-9—These verses also seem to score one for those who think women ought to be restricted in ministry, because, after all, they hold a secondary place in creation and seem to be subservient to men.

On the other hand, v. 10 indicates that the woman *ought to have* (doesn't say that she *does* have, but she *ought to have*) authority upon her head "because of the angels." Now, I don't know what this means (and I have read a ton of technical literature on the passage), but I would think if we're concerned to get our worship practices right, we ought to be giving attention to this text.

vv. 11-12 seem to modify Paul's hierarchical picture of males/females, at least as far as their relationship "in the Lord." "In the Lord, the woman is nothing apart from the man and the man is nothing apart from the woman, for just as the woman came 'out of' the man—I take it this is a reference to Gen 2:22—so also the man comes 'through' the woman—I take it this is a reference to the birth process. You might could score one here for the "egalitarians."

vv. 13-15—What *is* it with Paul and head-coverings, including hair length? Why does he make such a *big deal* of it? Why does he use the language of *shame* and *honor* about these practices? Now, I think good exegesis can help us answer these questions in the context of 1st-century Christian conduct in the Roman world, but I doubt that scholars

will ever attain consensus about some of these questions. More importantly, I wonder how it is that the twin issues of head coverings and hair length, which were very serious concerns to Paul, have been marginalized out of existence in most contemporary churches of the West (not, however, in some other parts of the world). I think the answer to why we have marginalized these concerns is that we are willing to take the risk that these texts are so culturally conditioned they simply no longer “work” within the social and cultural setting of the modern West. We don’t argue about this; we simply assume it. But what if we’re wrong? That seems to be a risk we are willing to take. But what if we were actually to *talk* about how casually we dismiss such texts as being relevant to our own situations? *Then* we might actually need to do some theology, some critical thinking.

The Need for Theology: Taking the Risk of Being Wrong

I am suggesting that if we are going to articulate a theology that underwrites either a *restrictive* or an *unrestrictive* model of women in ministry, we have to take some risks, even the risk of being wrong, and we ought not to be reticent to take such risks, because there is a lot at stake. Our churches take such risks in other respects all the time.

We have created ecclesiastical structures, ministries, and practices that would be unrecognizable as “church” to anyone in the first century, but have defended these practices as culturally-responsible methods of advancing the gospel in circumstances vastly different from those in first-century Rome or Corinth. We create “by-laws”; we make of our churches legal corporations. We place on our websites “man-made creeds,” to use the old expression, justifying this practice by saying people need to know what we believe. The only description in the NT (with any detail) of what actually went on in a typical house church at worship is found in 1 Cor 11:2-33; 14:(2-22), 23-40. Do you know any congregation that conducts its Sunday worship this way?

To be sure, most of our churches have taken the risk of including women in far more positions of public leadership than was the case even a generation ago; but most of our churches steadfastly bar women from the eldership and the ministry of preaching. We hear it said that this is a “hermeneutical issue,” and it is that, but it is more. It is also a theological and practical issue. It will not be laid to rest by exegesis alone.

With the best will in the world, and the most careful exegetical practices of which we are capable, we will not be able to defend an egalitarian reading of the Bible, or the NT in general, and certainly not of 1 Cor 11:2-16. Paul operates from a hierarchical anthropology as a taken-for-granted worldview. This perspective is mitigated, to be sure, in such texts as Gal 3:27-28 and here in 1 Cor 11:10-12. In fact, Paul’s references to his converts as “brothers” (and sisters) was one way of challenging the taken-for-granted class structure of Graeco-Roman society and even subverting the notion of the family as based on blood relationships. Indeed, Paul could insist that, in Christ, even the master was a brother to the slave; even the wealthy was a sister to the poor. Paul took quite a risk in thus challenging cultural norms. Nevertheless, complete social equality in the modern western definition was, in the most exact sense of the phrase, an unthinkable thought for anyone living in Paul’s world. That was a world in which, except for the elite and wealthy, women were not as well-educated as men, did not serve as heads of state, or Roman Senators, or lawyers, or public orators, and could not vote. We have no evidence earlier than the second century, A.D. that any woman served as a synagogue elder, and even that evidence is ambiguous. So I am not trying to make the case that the NT churches had women elders.

If you and I decide to advocate for complete equality of women in all the ministries of the church, including the eldership, we do so, not just by quoting and explaining biblical texts. No, we will actually have to develop a theological anthropology that values the heart, soul, mind, strength, and spiritual gifts of a woman equally with those of a man. We can honestly say there are many texts of Scripture that do *not* treat males and females with equal honor, but I believe the gospel seems naturally inclined to lead us in the direction of equality. I take the risk of being wrong about this, but those who continue to restrict women from some church ministries are also taking the risk of being wrong. I would rather err in the direction of freedom than in the direction of restrictions. In the 1850s a similar battle was fought in this country over the question of freedom and equality for black slaves. Those who confined themselves to arguing from the letter of Scripture had the better of this argument because the Bible everywhere assumes and nowhere directly condemns the practice of slaveholding. Let me put the question to you: Do you think those arguing for freedom and equality for the races were right to take this risk—in spite of all the biblical texts that teach the acceptability of slaveholding? Are you willing to take a similar risk by advocating for the freedom and equality of women in the ministries of the church? What do *you* think? What's happening in your congregations? What questions or comments do you have? The floor is open.