

The Biblical and Evangelical Justification for Women Serving as Ministers and Pastors in the Church

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The Lord has yet more truth to break forth from his holy Word
John Robinson

A few years back I received an unexpected book “The Genealogy of John Robinson a Remarkable Man”. As I read of his influence upon the church, his character and stature grew in my heart and mind. As pastor of the Pilgrims, his parting words to them before they embarked on their perilous journey to America on the Mayflower are as fitting today as they were then four centuries ago: “The Lord has yet more truth to break forth from his holy Word”. Robinson’s exhortation was neither to a radical rejection of the status quo nor an appeal to cast Scripture adrift on the whim of current fashion, but for his people to remain attuned to the fecund Word of God that renews and replenishes the people of God.

Thus, I was somewhat perplexed by John B. Carpenter’s appeal to Robinson’s “new light” in his article “The Competency of God’s Communication”, which argues for a “new light” based on Scripture that would ban women from ordination or places of authority in the Church.

Dr. Carpenter’s argues that all “explicit” biblical references call for a gender specific subordination of women to men, which should prevent women from having spiritual authority over men in the church as ministers or teachers. Carpenter’s use of “explicit”, however, is a clever dodge for it allows him to ignore the welter of counter-examples in Scripture where women wielded spiritual authority over men by God’s sanction. What Carpenter ignores, however, we must not if we are to get a fuller understanding the entire teaching of Scripture as well as Paul understanding of the role of women in the Church. This fuller reading of Scripture and a careful examination of Paul’s explicit teaching on the role of women

in worship yield the opposite conclusion; that according to Scripture women are called by God to exercise spiritual gifts and have been given authority by God over both men and women.

Women of Authority in the Old Testament

God raised up prophets by anointing them with the Holy Spirit to represent him before his people (1 Kings 19:16; 1 Chron 16:22). Failure to abide in the words of God's prophet carried dire consequences for it represented open rebellion to God's sovereignty (Duet 18:19). On the other hand, should an individual represent themselves as a prophet apart from God's sanction, they were to be put to death (Duet 18:20). If Carpenter's interpretation of the Bible's "explicit" teaching were correct, then one wouldn't expect God to sanction women prophets to exercise spiritual authority over Israel, but that is exactly what we do find. From the founding of Israel, women prophet exercised leadership by unction of the Holy Spirit: the sign of the sanction of God.

As prophet of Israel, Miriam, Moses's sister, had spiritual authority over all Israel and not merely over the children at the Sabbath school or the ladies tea.

I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from
the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also
Aaron and Miriam. (Micah 6:4)

Though Miriam was punished for opposing Moses's marriage to a Cushite, there is nothing to suggest that this came about because of the exercise of her divine calling to lead Israel (Numb. 12:2).

During the time of the Judges of Israel, Deborah did not derive her power and authority over Israel by cleverness or political acumen, but was vested by God as prophet and judge to exercise civil, spiritual, and judicial authority over all of Israel including its military leaders. So mightily did the Spirit of God rest upon Deborah that Barak, the commander of Israel's forces, feared to go to battle without her presence. Unlike Miriam, there is no incident of failure to jade Deborah's leadership. Rather, she is an example of a woman

ordained by God to exercise civil and spiritual authority over all Israel, both men and women.

In 2 Kings 22:14, Josiah inquires as to who speaks for God. His counselors direct him to the prophet Huldah. Huldah's response is almost dismissive:

"...Tell the man who sent you to me, This is what the LORD says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read.

Huldah's tenor packs a punch. Though Josiah is King, she shows no deference to this "man". Rather, it is he who must bend the knee to the authoritative word of God spoken by a woman with spiritual authority. The passage is meant to shock as prophet speaks down to king and woman to man. Huldah's words echo through Paul's own:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the **weak things** of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

Thus, Yahweh ordains, sanctions, and upholds the spiritual authority women as his official spokespersons and leaders of Israel. These women had authority over kings and generals as well as the nation. They ministered by the power of the Holy Spirit and were thus not deficient or raised up because no man was present to do the job. Indeed, the stories of Deborah and Huldah's cast doubt upon human hierarchies based on gender and or military might. The very fact they were women without the trappings of power, that placed in bold relief the power and wisdom of God who scoffs at human deference to outward appearance.

Though exemplary in nature, this does not diminish their

doctrinal import. The call, sanction, and unction upon women in ministry to exercise spiritual authority over men places God's imprimatur upon the ordination of women. Were these actions at odds with God's "explicit" will, it would cast serious doubt upon the consistency of God.

Women in the New Testament:

Even before Jesus' birth, women of the New Testament spoke God's authoritative word. Mary's prophecy at the Annunciation (Luke 1:46ff), Anna the prophetess at Jesus presentation (Luke 2:36ff), as well as the women who are the first to announce the resurrection of Jesus all point to the significant role of women had in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Any careful student of Luke's Gospel recognizes the doctrinal significance of these examples. God has chosen the weak and despised to be God's heralds.

Luke's narrative draws from the doctrinal verve of Paul who subverted ancient hierarchies to the great subversion of the Cross of Christ. This inversion carried over into Paul's actual practices. In Paul's letter to the Romans we find several prominent women involved in his ministry who had spiritual authority. Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2) is described as both a "deacon" and a "patron" of the church in Cenchreae. Indeed, if we assume that Romans is written before Philippians, then Phoebe is the first person named as a "deacon". With the title "patron", it is likely that she was a wealthy widow or single woman who by virtue of her high social status would have been a leading figure in the church. Paul mentions Prisca before Aquila (Rom 16:3-5) suggesting her greater importance. Paul's fellow prisoners Andronicus and Junia (a woman's name)¹ are declared by Paul "outstanding among the apostles who were in Christ before me." (Rom 16:7). This title "apostle" was most likely

¹ Prosopological studies have shown that "Junia" was a common name for women, but have produced no example of the male name "Junias". The only ground that this name refers to a man is the insistence that only a man could have been an "apostle". No evidence to the contrary, such a reading simply reveals the tendency to eisegete cultural biases into the text. James Dunn, The Theology of Paul. (Grand Rapids MI:Eerdmans, 1998) p. 587.

referring to the apostles appointed to mission by the risen Christ (1Cor 15:7). Thus, they were likely “founders” of some of the Roman churches.² In this same section in Romans, Paul commends the ministry (Rom 16:6,12) of four women: Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis.

In Roman society it was not uncommon for women to have positions of authority and patronage. Thus for women to exercise power and authority in the church would not have caused disruption or discomfort amongst Gentiles. Nonetheless, Greco-Roman society was hierarchical and issues of proper subordination did loom large in Paul’s day. As converting and inverting message of the cross penetrated Roman Society, it raised new issues with regard to social and familial decorum. Though Paul recognizes the revolutionary nature of the Gospel, his letters are often at pains to maintain those household and familial relationships necessary for sound order.

The complex nature of gender, status, family and household in combination with a lack of specificity in Greek has made interpretation of Paul’s views on the role of women in his Corinthian correspondence and Pastoral letter to Timothy extremely difficult. Greek does not distinguish between the terms “man/husband” or “woman/wife”. The term *gyne* in Greek can mean either “wife” or “woman”, especially when used in conjunction with *aner* “man, Husband”. All interpreters, therefore, are forced to rely on context to determine whether Paul’s specific references to subordination of women refer to a general gender subordination of women to men, or specifically a role subordination of wives to husbands. Some have appealed to Paul’s reference to the Genesis account of creation as proof that Paul refers to gender and not marital relations. This, however, provides no relief in that Eve was both the first woman and also the first wife and therefore unhelpful in adjudicating to what Paul refers to in these passages.

Paul’s Restrictions on Women in Ministry

Interpreting 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 represents just the dilemma scholars confront in regard to Paul’s restrictions on women. In verse

² Ibid. p. 587.

5, Paul accepts the practice of women praying and prophesying in worship but constrains that worship so that it will not be misunderstood. Paul addresses the dress and decorum of women in relation to men which confirms that this prophesying and praying took place in public worship that included both men and women and does not refer to private devotion. Women were to have their head “covered” when praying or prophesying as a sign of authority. Paul’s reasoning here is based on a cosmic hierarchy that places God as the head of Christ, Christ as the head of “man”, and “man” as the head of “woman”(11:3). As James Dunn has cogently argued, because a woman unveiled represented the “glory” of man, “therefore man’s glory must be veiled, so that in her prayer and prophecy she glorifies only God”.³ Thus, rather than a sign of general subjugation of women to men, head covering in worship directly glorified God and not men.

This helps untangle Paul’s argument. Some women glorify God through prayer and prophecy while others glorify God by their silence. Thus, Paul writes:

As in all the congregations of the saints, ³⁴ *gynaiekes* (**wives or women**) should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask **their own andras (man or husband)** at home; for it is disgraceful for a *gynaiki (wife or woman)* to speak **in the church.**

1st Corinthians 14:33b-36

Given Paul’s previous instruction on women praying and prophesying with head covered, the above censure appears contradictory if it refers to women in general. Women could not pray and prophecy were they not allowed to speak. So great is this contradiction that some interpreters have suggested that 1st Corinthians 14:33b-36 is a later and clumsy interpolation into Paul’s text. Nonetheless, the bluntness of this contradiction actually argues

³ Ibid. p. 590

for its authenticity. Because the term *gynaiki* can have different meanings, context is everything. Paul's Corinthian congregation would immediately recognize Paul's shift of nuance. As the passage above itself indicates, it is "wives" who are to "as their husband at home". Paul's demand for silence fits with what we know of women in Greco-Roman households. Sisters, single women and widows had a considerable degree of independence and relative authority. Wives, on the other hand, had married into a family and thus had a lower status.⁴ Given the hierarchical nature of Roman households, wives speaking publicly in worship would bring shame on the husband by upsetting proper household order and authority. On the other hand, widows or unmarried sisters would represent no such indiscretion. This brings clarity to Paul's concerns in his letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 2:11-15). Here, even stronger than the passage in 1 Corinthians, the clear reference is to wives and not women in general. Paul's reference to sanctification through "childbirth" would be scandalous if it referred to widows or unmarried women. Thus, his reference to Eve grounds the husband/wife relationship to the created order, but not a general submission of women to men. This understanding also comports well with Paul's other references to marriage in Ephesians, Colossians and Titus. Indeed, what becomes increasingly clear is that while the relationship between unmarried women and men was relatively uncomplicated in light of the Gospel, it had raised serious questions as to the proper relationship of wives to husbands to the point where Paul felt compelled to ground marital order biblically. Thus, in both of these passages, carefully distinguishing Paul's usage brings harmony to Paul's testimony, properly folds in his concern for order and proper submission in accord to the actual context and resonates with entirety of Scripture. On the other hand, Carpenter's interpretation neglects the nuance of Paul's position and leads to sharp contradictions not only within Paul's letters, but with the entirety of Biblical teaching.

What then are the implications of this for women in ministry? At a minimum, it should be resolved that Scripture teaches that women have been and continue to be called by God to exercise spiritual authority and leadership both in the Old and New

⁴ Ibid. p. 591

Testaments though, for Paul, this limited to widows and single women due to familial decorum. Some might argue that this means only single women and widows should be allowed to hold positions of authority in the Church because Paul bars wives from having authority in the church in light of Eve's rebellion. This argument, however, again confuses gender and role in Paul's distinction. Paul's concern was marital disorder specifically in relation to Greco-Roman households. What Paul desires are harmonious orderly relationships between husbands and wives, but the rules he establishes are culture specific even if the principle of order and harmony is universal. Marital and household rule and order will vary from culture to culture. Thus, it may have been rude for wives to speak in social gatherings in Corinthian homes in AD 50, but that is certainly not the case today. Would those who forbid wives to hold ecclesial office based on these passages also require that sisters and widows be regarded on a higher plane than our wives? Even Southern Baptist wives would object to that. Nonetheless, in Paul's day, such deference and silence were expected and to break these rules disruptive and rude.

We, however, do not worship in Greco-Roman households, but in churches. Balancing Greco-Roman household manners and church worship is not our problem. Thus, Paul's proscription on wives speaking in worship no longer applies specifically although the principle of order and harmony remain, but now relative to cultural propriety. Note, however, this appeal to cultural difference is not used to reject the clear teaching of Scripture, but to affirm it. Were Carpenter's view correct, Paul's teaching would be at odds with the whole of Scripture as well as his own teaching. Paul's own practices would stand condemned by his own explicit teaching. Worse this would question the integrity of God by putting at logger heads God's explicit will and his practice of calling, sanctioning and empowering women to exercise spiritual authority over men in God's name.

Darkness and Light:

The issue of the ordination of women has been hotly contested amongst over the past century. Evangelicals of all stripes have been

disturbed by the effects of secularization, easy divorce, single parenting, radical feminism and other destructive forces that have undermined the order and harmony of family, church and society. Thus, claims that women had a “right” to be leaders in the church has generally met a cold reception in evangelical circles. Rights language, based on the tenets of modernism and liberalism, had little leverage amongst evangelicals because ministry is neither a civil right nor a feminist assertion, but the calling of God. Nonetheless, apart from the Southern Baptists, the great majority of evangelicals have disentangled cultural assumptions and their distaste for secular liberation theologies to grant a full and fair understanding of God’s Word. Accordingly, they have come to conclude that careful exegesis of Scripture leads to the endorsement of women in ministry and thus proved true John Robinson’s words that *“The Lord has yet more truth to break forth from his holy Word”*.

In contrast, as their biblical hand has weakened, the argument of those who oppose women in ministry is increasingly exposed as an attempt to recreate the “traditional” family order of a perceived golden era. This best describes what Carpenter calls the “new light” of the Southern Baptists in America. Nonetheless, what began as a genuine renewal movement has begun to sour as the Southern Baptists more rigid stands have alienated large sections of fellow Baptist evangelicals who feel the movement is losing touch with its own spiritual legacy. Close to the heart of every good Southern Baptist lies the memory of Lottie Moon in whose name the Christmas offering to missions is raised. Lottie Moon began her missionary career working only with Chinese women, but her effectiveness, tenacity, endurance and love led her to expand her ministry to include men as well as women and children. When lesser men had to withdraw under the physical and cultural regimen of the harsh climes of Shandong province, she assumed their pastorates. In the end she died of malnutrition having refused to eat so as to ensure her fellow “Chinese sisters” who were starving had enough to eat. What a tragedy that given the “new light” of the Southern Baptist leadership today, it is doubtful whether Lottie Moon would be welcome in her own Church today. Rather than shut them out or silence them, it is time we welcome back the Miriams, Deborahs,

Huldahs, and Lottie Moon's of our day that they might be encouraged, supported and recognized as leaders called by God to serve his people.

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