

Discussions on Faith and Gender

Letters from the Elders to the Congregation
Sermons
Outline of Bible Class

CULVER PALMS CHURCH OF CHRIST
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
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CULVER PALMS Church of Christ
9733 Venice Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90034-5196

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Dear Brothers and Sisters:

As you may know, our congregation has been concerned with the issue of gender and faith for the past 20 years or so. In our quest to understand God's will, we have embarked on a journey toward truth and fuller understanding. This is a journey rather than a destination. Our major concern is that we continue the journey as a unified congregation toward a biblical understanding of the role of women. We desire to be gentle shepherds among the congregation as we seek to fulfill God's purpose in our community.

A journey begins with the first step. Our journey began almost 20 years ago when the topic of men and women from a Biblical perspective was first discussed in the pulpit and studied in our Bible classes. Since that time Frank Pack, Dan Knight, David Skates and Matt Soper have delivered lessons dealing with, or at least touching on, the subject.

In the Fall of 1995 the elders and Matt began studying the scriptures on this subject. During the Spring quarter of 1996 Matt and the elders taught an adult Bible class on the topic. During the Fall of 1996 we had informal conversations with most members of the congregation to solicit your thoughts and feelings about questions concerning the appropriate role of men and women in the church. We know that we weren't able to contact all of you, and we want to hear from everyone who would like to share their thoughts with us. In fact, we have extended an open invitation to every member and want you to know that we will be available to you on this or any other subject.

A major marker along the journey is the subject of "hermeneutics", the principles of interpreting and understanding the Bible. The rules of interpretation we use to understand the meaning of Biblical texts in our time are key to our understanding the intent of God for us. We need to examine our rules of interpretation. We must also note the assumptions we make as we seek to interpret the truth from God. To this end we intend to offer more opportunity to understand why differences of interpretation exist among genuine believers.

Our intent is to explain our current practice, involve the congregation in dialogue about gender issues, and propose future steps along the journey. We want to interweave the subject of hermeneutics throughout the discussion as we seek fuller understanding among members. We must all have an open mind and a solid faith built on informed conviction.

WHAT ARE THE SIGN POSTS DIRECTING US ON OUR JOURNEY?

In our culture there is tension between a sense-of-community and individual autonomy. In the church we are a community of God composed of many members. Each of us, men and women, boys and girls,

has the same spiritual worth in the kingdom of God. We have the same value with different gifts and functions.

For by the grace given me say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:3-8)

We view the church as extended family. In the model family the husband and father is to lead the family. The principle of male family leadership applies to the church as an extended family. We have concluded that men are to have authority in the extended church family as elders. What is the definition of spiritual leadership? What is the difference between authority, leadership, service, coordination, and participation? These are examples of the perspectives of relationship within the church family which we need to discuss.

WHERE ARE WE NOW AT CULVER PALMS?

During the past 20 years at Culver Palms, men and women have:

1. taught children's, teen and adult classes;
2. taught home Bible studies;
3. taught evangelistic Bible studies;
4. served as Bible school supervisors and coordinators;
5. served as VBS supervisors and coordinators;
6. served on the paid ministry staff;
7. served on the paid support staff;
8. served as ministry leaders and committee members in virtually all ministries of the church;
9. given oral testimonies to the church;
10. given oral mission reports to the church;
11. served as summer and full-time missionaries and evangelists;
12. served in benevolence and outreach ministries;
13. acted in drama presentations to the church;
14. participated in choral and singing group presentations to the church;
15. led congregational singing at special events;
16. served as ushers and greeters;
17. served the Lord's Supper to the church;
18. delivered sermons and messages at camps and retreats;
19. delivered messages and testimonies to the church at special programs;
20. led prayers in group, Bible school, home study and fellowship settings;
21. spoken for the church in community forums and before civic groups;
22. led in intervention, counseling, mediation and mentoring activities;
23. spoken to other churches in special classes and seminars;
24. made announcements in the assembly.

WHERE ARE WE GOING ON OUR JOURNEY?

Recognizing this history, we are also aware of the apostle Paul's admonition that:

"Everything is permissible" — but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible" — but not everything is constructive, Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. (I Corinthians 10:23, 24)

Based on our study, we believe the following practices are permitted by the scriptures:

1. women serving the communion at the Lord's Table;
2. women participating in a worship team to facilitate congregational singing;
3. women making the formal announcements in the assembly;
4. women reading the assigned scripture in the assembly;
5. women leading the congregational prayer in the assembly;
6. women baptizing converts in the assembly;
7. women serving as deacons of the congregation.

Our challenge is to ask not just what is permitted but also what will build up the congregation.

We want you to join us in this dialogue as we consider what is most beneficial for Culver Palms at this time. We must collaborate together to seek answers which will enable us to remain united even though we do not agree with one another on every point of doctrine and practice. The hallmark of a biblical Christian community is not unanimity on every issue but rather faith expressing itself in love. We want everyone to have the opportunity to study, question, talk, and pray about these issues. We pledge that no changes will be made in secret or in a surprising manner.

WHAT ARE THE PLANNED STEPS ON THE JOURNEY?

Future planned steps in our journey together include:

1. a series of sermons;
2. Care Group discussions;
3. Bible classes;
4. Sunday night panel discussions.

We have asked Matt to preach a series of four monthly sermons on gender and faith from April through July of 1997. The reason we have asked him to stagger these sermons over a period of four months is, first, to give us all a chance to discuss, and second, to help us all keep from being consumed by this one subject

In conjunction with Matt's sermon series, we recommend that Care Groups discuss gender and faith in their meeting next following the sermon on the topic. The sermon and discussion questions will be structured so that our discussion time together will be profitable yet open to full expression. If you are not currently a participant in one of our Care Groups, please consider joining one of the existing groups or asking for help in starting a new group. The Care Group environment will provide a non-threatening environment to discuss the topic. Please join us the dialogue as the journey continues.

Beginning in June of 1997 we intend to provide a series of adult Bible classes on gender and faith so that every member will have opportunity to participate and share in the discussion. As we seek answers together about practical changes, unity concerns are important. Thorough discussion is important. Truth is important. Wisdom tempered by experience is important. Managing change in a sensitive manner is important.

After Matt's introductory sermons and the associated Care Group discussion opportunities, the elders will host several panel discussions on Sunday evenings beginning in the Fall of 1997. We intend that all questions and responses will be addressed in an open forum as we continue the journey together.

In summary, the prospect of change can be as unsettling as change itself. We as a congregation with a mission from God to our community must be vigilant as we strive for unity and harmony in our church family, yet we must seek God's truth in practice among us, We must treat one another with Christian love, kindness, and respect. We pray God's richest blessing on each of you.

In Christian love,

Your elders

Bernie, David, Roland, Ron, Tom and Woody

The Role of Women in the Church

Message #1

Matt Soper

4/27/97

This is the first of four planned Sunday morning messages over a four month period on the subject of the role of women in the church. In addition, tonight we will begin a series on inspiration, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible, in which we talk about these things and then use the tools we develop to study together the relevant passages about the role of women in the church. And I should mention that we will also be offering this class on Sunday morning when the new teaching quarter starts in June.

In the second message, on June 1, we are going to look closely at I Corinthians 11 and 14. In the third message, on June 22, we are going to look closely at I Timothy 2 and Romans 16. In the fourth message, for which I have not set a date yet, we are going to look at our Restoration heritage and what has been said on this subject in the past, as well as consider some important questions that are foundational to this subject. But today I want to set the table.

I use that expression on purpose. I said last week that one of the differences between a healthy and functional family and an unhealthy and dysfunctional family is that a healthy, functional family deals with things on top of the table, and an unhealthy, dysfunctional family keeps things under the table. Our appointed spiritual leaders, the elders, have gone to the scriptures to gain an understanding of this subject and have come back telling us what they found. But they have not implemented anything or forced anything on us; they have asked us to join them in dialogue, discussion, and study about this subject. They have pledged that no changes will be made in secret or in a surprising manner. At Culver Palms, we are going to go through this with everything on top of the table. At Culver Palms, we are going to distinguish ourselves by the way in which we go through this challenging, unsettling process of dialogue and discussion. At Culver Palms, we are going to give witness to the love of Christ by the way we treat one another and especially those with different viewpoints. At Culver Palms, we are going to look for the best and try to bring out the best in one another, because that is the mark of Jesus Christ among us.

The first question I would like to address, and indeed feel like you are owed an answer to, is this one: Why are we studying this subject and considering making changes?

It is not because women pressured us. That is a common myth among churches who are studying this, the myth that a group of radical women approached the church leaders and demanded that they be given public roles in worship, which prompted the leaders to consider the issue. This popular myth usually has no basis in reality, and certainly is not true at Culver Palms. Of the women I know who believe that women's roles in worship are presently too restrictive, none of them has any particular desire to read the scriptures or pray or serve the communion. What they are disturbed by is what they perceive to be the hypocrisy of selective scriptural interpretation; taking

some texts literally, and writing others off as cultural; not allowing women to speak in the, quote, worship assembly, but saying something like, “We have now ended our worship assembly,” and then letting women speak. I don’t know of any women who have a burning desire to be up front in worship. They would like to see women participate as a matter of principal, but they don’t care if they are the women doing it. They just want us to be honest about what the scriptures say.

We are also not studying this subject and considering making changes in order to please the outside culture. As important as outreach and evangelism are, and they are very important, they are not ends that justify the means. They are a means of glorifying God and taking his message to the world. Paul says in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.” We are not ashamed of the gospel, especially when it is counter-cultural, which it often is. We don’t pander to culture.

Having said that, is culture a factor? ABSOLUTELY. Most of us spend 165 hours a week in the midst of culture, and we don’t leave that behind when we assemble as the church three hours a week. Culture has always served to make the church examine the truth of its practices. Forty years ago culture became so agitated by segregation between whites and blacks that culture forced the church to examine the truth of its practices regarding segregation. And the church forty years later can look at the same scriptures it used to justify segregation, and at the same plea for unity, and say, “We were wrong.” And I might add here that one of the reasons many people gave for not wanting to integrate churches was because it would destroy unity. Folks, sometimes unity can be a false god.

One of our own elders, Woody Hughes, has shared with me on several occasions that twenty-five or thirty years ago, he was in the extreme minority, and even ostracized and vilified, for maintaining that the Holy Spirit indwells the individual Christian believer. He believed that the Holy Spirit works through the Word but also indwells the heart of the believer, and this was a minority position. The mainstream position was that the Holy Spirit only works through the Word of God, the scriptures. Thirty years later, looking at the same scriptures, the mainstream belief in the churches of Christ is that the Holy Spirit indwells the individual believer. The scriptures didn’t change. Our understanding of the scriptures changed.

We are not studying this subject and considering making changes because women pressured us, and we are not studying this subject and considering making changes in order to appeal to culture. We are doing it because our spiritual leaders felt that our practices reflected more allegiance to tradition than to a responsible reading of the scriptures.

I had the privilege of attending Pepperdine’s graduation for Seaver College on Friday at the invitation of a friend. I was so impressed when I heard that Pepperdine has a statement of affirmation, and I was even more impressed when I finally got to read it. It begins, “Pepperdine University affirms that God is, that He is revealed uniquely in Christ” and then it goes on to affirm some other things. One that caught my eye was this one; “Pepperdine University affirms that truth, having nothing to fear from investigation, should be pursued relentlessly in every discipline.” In the

churches of Christ we don't have any written affirmations like this, but I have always believed and would always hope that this would be one of our unwritten affirmations, that truth has nothing to fear from investigation, and that truth should be pursued relentlessly.

I don't mean to be flip, but I suppose if you feel inclined to blame someone for the fact that we are examining the truth of our practices, you should blame the Restoration heritage upon which the churches of Christ are built. It is a back-to-the-Bible heritage. It is a heritage which says, "We are not going to formulate creeds and inscribe them on stone and turn them into universal dogma" but rather "We are going to make the scriptures our only guide." It is a heritage which says, "You may disagree with my opinion, but not with my right to go to the scriptures for my opinion."

Do you know what one of the early slogans of the Restoration heritage was? "In matters of faith, unity. In matters of opinion, liberty. In all things, charity." How ironic and sad that over time this back-to-the-Bible movement did indeed develop dogma; it simply was not written down. How ironic and sad that this unity movement proceeded to distinguish itself over the next century and a half by its divisions and quarrels.

The highest principle of the Restoration Movement is to examine the scriptures continually. If we cannot question traditional practice in the light of our examination of scripture, then we have allowed tradition to supersede the authority of the scriptures.

I need to share with you my own journey in this area. I have told you how I left the business world in 1987 to go back to school to study the Bible, three years after graduation from college. I did not at the time want to or plan to be a preacher. For lack of a better way of saying it, and at the risk of painting myself as noble, I went back to school to seek the Truth. I wanted to immerse myself in the Bible and the Christian faith to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ. I wanted to build a firm foundation of understanding.

One of the things I was taught at the Institute for Christian Studies in Austin, Texas, was how to dig into the scripture and use responsible methods for discovering the meaning and then applying that meaning to our day and age. I learned the original languages in which the Bible is written. I learned about context, and the importance of not proof-texting. And somewhere along the way, when one year of study stretched into five, I began to be a little troubled, not by some of our practices, but by the way we used scripture to justify them.

When I came to Los Angeles in July of 1994 to interview with the Search Committee and the Elders, I distinctly remember one of the elders asking me this question: "How do you feel about the role of women issue?" (because it had already become an "issue" in many churches). And I said the following: "I don't have any particular emotional desire to make changes. But I can't justify our current practice with scripture." And then I went on to tell about a friend of mine in Seminary whose denomination did not allow women to participate up front in worship, using the reasoning simply that, "If we allow women to participate up front, then the men will just fade into the background."

They didn't even try to base it on scripture. And I told the elders that although I disagreed with the reasoning, I appreciated the honesty.

This is a hugely emotional issue. Scripture is just the tip of the iceberg. Underneath are fears about men fading into the background, fears about becoming more like other denominations, fears about the slippery slope ("if we change this, what will we change next?"). That is why dialogue, listening, talking, openness, being "on top of the table," is so important. There is nothing wrong with having these fears as long as we talk about them on top of the table.

What I want to do today is present a very brief overview of four things: the place of women in Israelite religion as depicted in the Old Testament, the place of women in the world of inter-testamental and first century Judaism and Greco-Roman culture into which Jesus brought his message, the way in which woman participated in Jesus' ministry, and the environment for women in the early Church. I promise you this will not be a dry, historical lecture but a brief, fast-paced overview, so pay attention.

ISRAEL

In Israelite family life, the husband and father was the undisputed head. The nation of Israel thought of herself as an extended family, with profound commitments to the "father's house." Marriage and the production of children were of major importance, and so for most Israelite women the great events of their lives were marriage and giving birth to children. Women raised the children and ran the household. Proverbs 31 gives us an indication of how much running the household could entail. The "ideal" woman depicted in Proverbs 31 makes a profit from the household's business ventures, she oversees both the purchasing and selling of clothing, she supervises the household servants. So valuable is she in this role that sometimes she is referred to as her husband's "glory."

Despite all this responsibility, she was still subordinate to her husband. The husband's authority was based on his legal responsibility for his household, not on the inferiority of women, which is an important point that we will talk about later. The offices of judges and prophets were considered civil offices rather than religious offices, and so Miriam prophesying in Exodus 15, Huldah being a prophetess in II Kings 22, Deborah as a prophetess and a judge in Judges 4 were not a violation of this principle. They were subordinate to their husbands at home, but were considered to have been raised up by God for these roles.

In terms of their private religious life, Israelite women were free to approach God in prayer and were even free to take the Nazirite vows, which involved a high degree of devotedness. In public worship, they served at the entrance to the tent of meeting (Exodus 38) and participated in the worship of God by singing. They were excluded from being priests, and there is no indication women were ever elders among the people of Israel.

INTER-TESTAMENTAL AND FIRST CENTURY JUDAISM

A significant change occurs by the time of the first century Judaism in which Jesus grows up. Most importantly, women are now seen as inferior to men. Philo, a Jewish philosopher, is quoted as saying, “The attitude of man is informed by reason; the attitude of a woman by feelings.” Josephus, the Jewish historian, puts it this way: “The woman is inferior to the man in every way. Let her accordingly be obedient, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for authority has been given by God to man.” The Talmud is even more explicit in its teaching of women’s inferiority. It frequently classes women with children and Gentile slaves.

This had profound implications for women in Jewish society. Because women were seen as the instigators of sexual temptation, any contact was minimized between the sexes outside the home. In Jewish religious life, women were expected to obey the Law. They could attend synagogue, but often sat in a separate section and could not make up the “quorum” of ten people needed to assemble. Women could listen to scripture reading and exposition but were not expected to learn or gain deep understanding. Rabbi Eliezer of the first century is quoted as saying, “Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman. . . whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her obscenity.”

Interestingly, women were “qualified” under the Law to participate in the oral reading of the Scripture but were not allowed to in practice. The prevailing view of a women’s role at the synagogue service is reflected in a comment by one rabbi based on Deuteronomy 31:10-13: “the men came to learn, the women came to hear.” What the text in Deuteronomy actually says is: “Every seventh year. . . during the festival of booths. . . you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people — men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns — so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law.”

JESUS’ MINISTRY

It is no wonder the Jewish authorities had so many problems with Jesus. He broke their traditions in many ways. James Hurley, in his book, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, says this: “Perhaps the most striking thing about the role of women in the life and teaching of Jesus is the simple fact that they are there. Although the gospel texts contain no special sayings repudiating the views of the day about women, they uniformly testify to 1) the presence of women among the followers of Jesus, and 2) Jesus’ serious teaching for these women. These two things constitute a break with tradition that has been described as “without precedent in (then) contemporary Judaism.”

Jesus, unlike the rabbis, taught women and willingly received them among his followers. They were persons for whom he had a message and were treated as such. The gospels provide us with a number of examples of Jesus’ respect for and teaching of women that stand in marked contrast to the rabbis of the day.

In John 4, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at an outdoor well in Sychar. From the perspective of the rabbis, she had three strikes against her: she was a Samaritan, she was a woman, and she was immoral. Jesus' disciples can hardly believe Jesus talks to her. Yet he does, and not about the weather. Jesus initiates a theologically profound conversation with her that was unheard of from a Jewish rabbi.

In Matthew 15, Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman whom his disciples want to brush off. Jesus engages her in conversation. He takes her seriously. At the end of this encounter, he says to her, "Woman, great is your faith."

In Jewish literature of the time, women are almost never used to exemplify trust in God or theological insight. In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus praises the woman who anoints him with perfume for her faith and love. In Mark 5, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for years touches Jesus' garment and is healed, and Jesus tells her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. In Luke 10, Jesus allows Mary to sit in on his teaching of the disciples while Martha works in the kitchen.

Jesus considered his teaching to be for women as well as for men and pointedly sought to teach women. Women were among the traveling companions of Jesus, a scandalous thing at the time. They are not a part of the crowd but rather a part of his close inner circle. Both women and men are cited by the gospels to portray great faith. I think Hurley puts it so well when he says, "Neither too much nor too little should be made of this fact. These were not women apostles. Neither were they casual hangers on."

THE EARLY CHURCH

Now none of this says anything about women's roles in the worship assembly of the early church. But what it does is set a tone. One of the rallying cries of the early Christian movement was "freedom;" freedom from the Law; freedom from sin; freedom from works righteousness. I WANT YOU TO LISTEN VERY CAREFULLY TO WHAT I SAY NEXT. It is foundational to my understanding of the relevant passages used to dictate women's roles, so whether you agree with it or not, you need to know that it is a major presupposition of mine. It is this: *Many, if not most, of the problems in the early church as depicted in the New Testament are caused by a misunderstanding of what it means to be free in Christ.*

Slaves misunderstood it. Paul has to say in Ephesians 6, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling." It would be easy for Christian slaves to assume that their freedom in Christ meant freedom from the old obligations of slavery. Paul has to give special instructions to Christian slaves with Christian masters. That was a situation with great potential for misunderstanding.

Gentile Christians misunderstood it. In I Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, people assume that just because they are "free" to eat all things, they have no responsibility to their brother or sister in Christ. But Paul tells them not to let this freedom of theirs cause a brother or sister to stumble.

Women misunderstood it. All of the sudden they can speak and take part in worship, and they forget that they still have an obligation to show respect for their husbands. Paul says in I Corinthians 11; “any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head,” which Paul has said is her husband. She disgraces her husband. How? Not by praying or prophesying, but by taking off her veil, which was a sign of subordination to her husband.

All of the sudden, as opposed to not being able to even learn the Law in Judaism, they can learn, study, and even teach. But they are easy prey for false teachers, as depicted in II Timothy 3:5, when Paul says, “Among (these destructive people) are those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, (listen carefully) who are always being instructed but can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” And so Paul puts an end to that, and his reasoning is that Eve was deceived first, not Adam.

All of the sudden, they can ask questions and speak up in the assembly, and they end up piping up so much that they become as disruptive as the tongue speakers and people who prophecy, so that Paul tells them to shut up and if they have a question, they ought to ask it of their husbands at home (I Corinthians 14).

We are going to look at these scriptures in great detail in the second and third messages on June 1 and June 22. But I want to be clear about my take on this. A sweeping principle like that expressed in Galatians 3:28 (“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”) undoubtedly resulted in much misunderstanding. Many, if not most, of the problems in the early church as depicted in the New Testament are caused by a misunderstanding of what it means to be free in Christ.

When we have similar problems, we should follow the instructions for dealing with those problems.

And that leads us to a key principle of responsible interpretation of scripture. And I want to credit Bill Love, a preacher for many years in Houston, with this saying. “Some scriptures are vitamins to be taken every day. Other scriptures are prescriptions to be taken only for specific illnesses.”

We know and utilize this, but selectively.

When Jesus tells the Rich Young Ruler to give his money away and come follow him, we understand that to apply not in all situations but to those situations where someone’s wealth stands between them and God. When Paul tells Christian women in I Timothy 2 not to braid their hair, or dress with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, we understand that to apply not in all situations but to those situations where women’s dress somehow shames her husband or is perhaps too provocative and disturbing for the assembly. Some scriptures are vitamins to be taken every day. Other scriptures are prescriptions to be taken only for specific illnesses. We know and utilize this, but selectively.

Let me share a principle of human relations and human nature with you. Look at the picture of the woman in the sermon outline provided today. How many of you see a young woman? How many of you see an old woman? How many of you aren't sure what you see?! I took this picture from Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The interesting thing is that how you see this picture is greatly determined by two things: First, by what picture you are used to seeing. And second, by what picture you want to see.

Now, if this picture were a scripture, it wouldn't matter what picture we liked best, or what picture we thought worked best in our church, or what picture we were used to seeing. If this picture were a scripture, the paramount question would be, "What picture is the artist/author trying to paint?"

This exercise demonstrates that good, faithful people can look at the same scripture and disagree because they look at it from different perspectives.

I told you last week that I believe the issue of the role of women in the church is part wine and part wineskin. I want to tie that together now. I believe that the wine is the principle of male spiritual authority in the church. The wineskin is how that is practiced.

I recall reading a story of missionaries working in a culture where it was considered disgraceful for men to serve at the table. And yet these missionaries insisted on men serving the Lord's Supper. They made little progress in that situation because they were confusing the wine with the wineskin. The wine burst the old wineskin and spilled onto the ground because they would not adjust.

Let me conclude with two things. First, a gentle reminder. The hallmark of a biblical Christian community is not unanimity on every issue, but faith expressing itself in love. God cares more about our love and how we treat one another than about our oh-so-perfect knowledge. Second, a universal truth to keep in mind, and again I quote Bill Love. "God the Father cares for his children. We are all his children. God is caring for us" through the thick and the thin, through the good times and the hard times.

Praise God for loving us steadfastly. Praise him for his son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Praise Him.

PRAYER/INVITATION



The Role of Women in the Church

Message #2

Matt Soper

4/27/97

INTRODUCTION

This is the second of four messages over the course of four months on the subject of the role of women in the church. The manuscripts of these messages will be on the literature table in the foyer after each one is preached, and you can order a tape by indicating on your attendance card that you want the tape or by calling the church office. Our theme for our discussion of the role of women in the church is “Everything on top of the table.” We are going to do everything out in the open. Nothing will be hidden or secret. And so everything that I say will be available on tape or in writing, and as you saw this morning, the Adult Bible Class on this topic is set up for discussion and dialogue. At Culver Palms, we are going to do everything on top of the table and we are going to distinguish ourselves by the way in which we treat one another through this, because that, much more than unanimity on a certain issue, is the mark of the presence of Christ among us.

I CORINTHIANS

Today we are going to look at I Corinthians 14:26-40. But in order to do that responsibly, we have to consider the context of the passage. Every scripture comes in the context of a paragraph, and every paragraph in the context of a chapter, and every chapter in the context of a section, and every section in the context of a book or letter, and every book or letter in the context of a certain genre of biblical literature ((.e.g., Gospels, Pauline epistles, General Epistles, Apocalyptic, etc.) and every genre of biblical literature in the context of either the Old or the New Testament. And so we must first consider the context of I Corinthians 14:26-40.

Our first question has to do with Paul’s letter to the Corinthians which we call First Corinthians. What is the situation in Corinth which causes Paul to write? We gain some valuable clues as to the situation in Corinth in the first few paragraphs of the letter. Right up front, starting in verse 10, Paul addresses the division in the church. The church in Corinth is full of factions. Paul says,

Now I appeal to you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. *

** all scripture quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

But within this general context of division and factions, there are two specific characteristics of the Corinthian church that are causing many problems: First, the Corinthians consider themselves to be very wise in the faith. And second, they consider themselves to be very accomplished in the use of spiritual gifts. Listen to how Paul gently chides them in the very first thing he says to them in the letter, in the initial greeting:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for IN EVERY WAY YOU HAVE BEEN ENRICHED IN HIM, IN SPEECH AND KNOWLEDGE OF EVERY KIND — just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — so that you are NOT LACKING IN ANY SPIRITUAL GIFT as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:4-7).

Paul addresses their delusions of wisdom and maturity in the first few chapters when he talks about the wisdom of the world being foolishness to God and the wisdom of God being foolishness to the world, and when he says that when he first came to them he brought milk, not solid food, and even now they are not ready for solid food, because the jealousy and quarreling among them indicates they are still immature (3:1-3).

Through the middle part of the letter he addresses questions they have sent to him about problems in the church such as sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, marriages between believers and unbelievers, and eating food offered to idols. He ends all this in 10:31-11:1 when he makes an appeal for living with integrity and living unselfishly, saying,

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

CHAPTER 11

And at this point virtually all commentators agree that a new section of the letter begins. 11:2-14:40 deals with the public worship assembly at Corinth and the problems therein. So now we have moved from the context of the letter to the context of the section of the letter in which our passage sits.

Paul begins by saying in 11:2,

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you.

He then says in 11:17,

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you. . .

Paul very deliberately distinguishes between what he commends/approves and what he does not commend/approve. So what does Paul commend? He commends the only thing he talks about in this section, the practice of men and women praying and prophesying in the public assembly of the church. In verses 4 and 5 he says,

Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled (uncovered) disgraces her head — it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved.

We will not have time today to cover chapter 11 in complete detail. I am going to lay out for you in broad strokes what I think is going on. Most importantly for this message, women are praying and prophesying in the public worship assembly in Corinth and very likely are doing so in other locations of the early church. In Acts 1, when Peter addresses the crowd gathered at Pentecost, one of the things he proclaims, quoting from the prophet Joel, is

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

In Acts 21:8-9, Luke narrates one of Paul's missionary journeys and says,

The next day we left and came to Caesarea; and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

In the freedom brought by Jesus Christ women pray and prophesy in the early church and neither Luke nor Paul sees any reason to comment critically on it. In fact, Paul commends it. Now one question that presents itself here is, "What exactly did it mean in the early church to "prophecy"?" My best understanding is that prophesying in the early church was simply proclaiming a word from God. It was somewhat similar to what we call preaching but different in that it was not prepared. A preacher studies for and prepares a message (we hope!); a prophecy was more spontaneous. If someone was given a word from the Lord in the early church, they stood up and shared that word with the assembly. And we will see in chapter 14 that this spontaneity could cause problems. So if women prayed and prophesied in Corinth and perhaps in other locations of the early church, why does Paul spend fifteen verses on this? Because the problem is not with women praying and prophesying; the problem is with how they are doing it. Specifically, they are removing the veil or cover on their head, which is a symbol of their submission to their husbands. And this is where we encounter a little difficulty because in the Greek language, the same word can designate "wife" or "woman," and the same word can designate "husband" or "man." Paul says in verse 3,

But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband (or man) is the head of the woman (or wife), and God is the head of Christ.

And Paul goes on to say that when a man/husband prays or prophesies with something on his head he disgraces his "head" (which is Christ), and when a woman/wife prays or prophesies with her head unveiled she disgraces her "head" (which is her husband; cf. verse 3).

My best understanding of what is going on here is that women were misunderstanding their freedom in Christ to pray and prophesy by discarding the CULTURAL SYMBOL of submission to their husbands in particular and to godliness and propriety in general. Warren Wiersbe, in his commentary on I Corinthians, puts it this way,

Eastern society at that time was very jealous over its women. Except for the temple prostitutes, the women wore long hair and, in public, wore a covering over their heads. (Paul did not use the word “veil,” i.e., a covering over the face. The woman put the regular shawl over her head, and this covering symbolized her submission and purity). For the Christian women in the church to appear in public without the covering, let alone to pray and share the Word, was both daring and blasphemous.

It might be equivalent to a woman today taking off her wedding ring and wearing blatantly sexually suggestive and inappropriate clothing. We have no such cultural symbol of submissiveness and propriety so it is hard for us to relate to this. But what is unmistakable is that women are praying and prophesying in the assembly at Corinth and Paul approves of it.

CHAPTERS 12-13

After chapter 11, Paul begins a very definite sub-section of this section on the public assembly. It encompasses all of chapters 12-14, and it begins in 12:1 with, “Now concerning spiritual gifts. . .”

The Corinthians have obviously asked Paul about spiritual gifts. There is obviously a problem in the Corinthian assembly related to spiritual gifts. Paul takes the next three chapters to address this problem. Much of what he says reflects general truths about the nature of spiritual gifts and how Christians are to conduct themselves in the assembly. He also includes specific instructions to address the problem. In other words, Paul gives us some vitamins to take daily, and he gives us some prescriptions to use for specific illnesses. Our challenge is to distinguish between the two.

Listen to how he begins, in 12:4

Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services (or ministries), but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (12:4-11)

You can see the problem here. The gifts of the Spirit are being exercised ad hoc, with no thought for the unity of the body and no thought for how the whole body will benefit. That is why Paul says in verse 7,

“To each is given the manifestation of the spirit FOR THE COMMON GOOD.”

Paul is urging the individualistic Christians in Corinth not just to consider their own benefit but the benefit of the whole group. Then he gives that great illustration of the church as a body, with every member contributing to the benefit of the whole body. Then he says in chapter 13, If I have

this or that spiritual gift, but not love, then it is worthless. PAUL APPEALS TO THEM TO USE THEIR SPIRITUAL GIFTS NOT FOR THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE BUT FOR THE GOOD OF THE CONGREGATION. In other words, gifts should be a function of love for others, not a replacement for it.

CHAPTER 14

And now we come to chapter 14. Paul continues, “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts. . .” There is nothing wrong with spiritual gifts! They are from God. Used responsibly and in love, they are a vital part of the church’s ministry. But Paul begins to apply his trump card here, and the trump card is contained in this single concept: Edification (or upbuilding). He uses this word (“oikodome/oikodomeo”) eleven times in the letter, and seven of those times are in chapter 14. He says in verses 3 and 4 that those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation, but those who speak in tongues build up themselves, not the church. He says that unless someone can interpret the tongue-speaking then the church is not built up by it. He uses some sarcasm, in my opinion, in verse 12 when he says, “Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them FOR BUILDING UP THE CHURCH.”

Paul then says in v. 22-25 that the Corinthians have it backwards. They are showing off their tongue-speaking in front of unbelievers and saving their prophesying for believers, and in reality it is prophesy that will pierce the heart of unbelievers, and tongues (properly interpreted) that will edify the congregation.

In summary, there are two general principles expressed in this first part of chapter 14. First, spiritual gifts are not for EXHIBITION, but for EDIFICATION (i.e., building up). The worship assembly must not be merely a forum for people to exhibit their spiritual gifts but must also edify the believers in their knowledge and understanding of God. And second, worship is a mixture of the EXPERIENTIAL and the COGNITIVE. It is a mixture of both heart and mind, and the Corinthians have overloaded on the experiential. Paul says in verses 18-19,

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words WITH MY MIND, (NIV: “intelligible”) in order to instruct others also, then ten thousand words in a tongue.

I CORINTHIANS 14:26-40

And so now we come to our passage. These fifteen verses are not random thoughts expressed by Paul in isolation but are related directly to what has come before. In fact, there is a certain sense in which these fifteen verses provide the CONCRETE APPLICATION for what Paul has been talking about before.

What should be done then, my friends? (14:26a)

The NIV renders this, “What then shall we say, brothers?” Eugene Peterson, in his modern translation, *The Message*, puts it this way: “So here’s what I want you to do.”

Paul continues,

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. (v. 26b)

It is important to distinguish between description and prescription. Paul is describing here. He says this is what is happening in Corinth. He isn't saying that whenever or wherever Christians gather, every Christian must have either a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation, or that all of these must be a part of every assembly. He is saying that this is what is happening in Corinth. And then he applies the over-arching principle which we talked about before.

Let all things be done for building up. (v. 26c)

There's that principle again! The public assembly is not for exhibition but for edification (i.e., building up). That is the general prescription: to build up the church in worship, not to build up one's ego by the display of one's special spiritual gift. And then, in rapid succession, Paul gives three specific prescriptions to augment this general prescription to let all things be done for building up. And he addresses three groups of people who are creating a problem in the church by exercising their privileges without regard to the general upbuilding of the congregation. First, the tongue-speakers.

If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them **BE SILENT** in church and speak to themselves and to God. (v. 27-28)

Apparently, the tongue-speakers are exercising their gifts selfishly, without regard to the order and edification of the assembly. Paul gives them some conditions: Let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret. And then Paul tells what to do if these conditions are not met. He says "Let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God." Paul uses the command form ("sigato") of a verb ("sigao – "to be silent") whose meaning in the New Testament is always determined by its context.

In Acts 12:17, when Peter is miraculously freed from prison and he goes to the house of his friends and they open the door, Luke tells us that Peter "motioned to them with his hand to be silent ("sigan"), and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison."

In Acts 21:40, when Paul is arrested in the temple in Jerusalem, Luke tells us that "the whole city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple." Eventually Paul is taken into custody, but he asks to address the unruly crowd. Luke tells us that when Paul had been given permission, he "stood on the steps and motioned for silence (siges)."

In these contexts and in the context of our passage in I Corinthians 14, the meaning of this is to be silent, to hold one's tongue so as not to create a disturbance. Paul tells anyone who wishes to speak in tongues that if he/she can't meet these conditions then "sigato," he/she is to hold his/her tongue and be silent.

Next, Paul addresses the people who prophecy:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person BE SILENT (sigato). For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and be encouraged.”

Here again Paul sets some conditions. He says let two or three speak, and let the others weigh what is said. And if someone has a similar revelation, let the first person hold his tongue so the next person can speak. He isn't telling the prophets they can never speak again; he is telling them there is a time to shut up and not speak. Apparently, in Corinth prophets would stand up and deliver their words from God simultaneously, and this created disorder and disruption. And that's what he addresses next. He says,

And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, for God is a God not of disorder but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. (v. 32-33)

In other words, don't claim that once the Spirit grabs hold you can't stop. The Spirit will be subject to the needs of the congregation. And then Paul makes a general comment to justify his detailed prescriptions: God is a God not of disorder but of peace. It is God's will that there be order in the assembly. In fact, the very last thing Paul says at the end of these three chapters is that

“all things should be done decently and in order.” (v. 40)

The problem in Corinth is one of disorder in the assembly resulting from the free and self-centered exhibition of spiritual gifts which don't particularly edify the assembly. And so in this “application” section Paul gives two general prescriptions, (“Let all things be done for building up,” v. 26, and “all things should be done decently and in order,” v. 40). These frame the section at the beginning and end. And then he gives specific prescriptions for problem people in the church, i.e., if certain conditions are not met, then “Let them be silent.” And the BASIS for all of this is,

for God is a God not of disorder but of peace as in all the churches of the saints”(v. 33).

THE WOMEN

Now we come to the women. You will notice that “as in all the churches of the saints” is part of v. 33, but in most of our Bibles it is included in a new paragraph to make it seem like part of v. 34. My understanding is that this is meant to go with v. 33. “For God is a God not of disorder but of peace as in all the churches of the saints.” There are three reasons for this:

First, in some manuscripts (and you should have a footnote in your Bible mentioning this), v. 34-35 are placed at the end of the chapter, after v. 40. Apparently certain scribes thought this was more appropriate and a strand of manuscript development followed this pattern. But here is the interesting thing: In the manuscripts in which v. 34-35 are moved to the end of the chapter, the end of v. 33 is

not moved with them. In other words, it is seen to be part of the statement about God being a God not of disorder but of peace.

Second, it is redundant to say, “As in all the churches of the saints, let the women be silent in the churches.”

Third, in a way that doesn’t come out in the English, in the Greek there is a very striking parallel between the tongue-speakers, the prophets, and the women. V. 27 begins, literally, “if tongues. . .” Verse 29 begins, literally, “prophets. . .” And verse 34 begins, literally, “Women/wives. . .” These are the three groups of people who are causing problems of disorder in the assembly.

And so what does Paul say. He says,

Women should be silent (“sigatosan”) in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (v. 34-35)

There are a number of questions which these two verses raise. First, what is the problem? The only clue we get to the problem is Paul’s solution. Women should be silent and if there is anything they desire to know, they should ask their husbands at home. The solution suggests that women are desiring to know things, probably by asking questions, and the context of the passage suggests they are asking questions in a disorderly manner, perhaps by interrupting and perhaps by not waiting their turn but by clamoring for answers two or three or four at a time. That is certainly an inference, but we make that inference in the same way we did with the tongue-speakers and the prophets, by reasoning from Paul’s solution. Paul’s comment that women “should be subordinate, as the law says,” indicates that they are engaging in some form of seriously disruptive speech.

What does it mean for women to be silent? We might best answer that question by asking a related question, “What kind of speaking is Paul prohibiting? In the Greek language there are two common words used for speaking, “legein” and “lalein.” “Legein” refers generally to spoken words; “lalein” refers generally to oral expression or utterance, of which speech is one form. In other words, “lalein” covers not only spoken expression but any vocal expression. That is why in Ephesians 5:19 Paul says,

Speak (lalountes) to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. (NIV)

And Paul uses that word here. Does that mean Paul is telling the church to return to the practice in Judaism of women having to be completely silent, not even singing? OF COURSE NOT. Paul never takes the legalist position of returning to life under the Law. And we are glad of this, because our women sing and speak and that is a blessing to us and a glory to God.

The form in which Paul uses this word, the present infinitive, refers specifically to the action as continuing or being repeated in some way. Now you might be thinking, “Wow. That’s pretty technical, having to go all the way to the specific tense and mood of one verb in one verse.” Let me ask you this. If I were to say to my children, “You are not permitted to continually speak at the dinner table.”

Would that be the same as saying, “You are not permitted to speak at the dinner table”? Do you think they would understand the difference? Of course they would. And so would the Corinthians, for whom Greek is their primary language. And so must we.

Carroll Osburn puts it this way in his article on this passage in the book, *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity (Vol. I)*,

“Lalein” (“to speak”) should be taken here to mean that they (the women) were “piping up,” giving free rein to “irresistible impulses” to ask question after question either of the speaker or of their husbands, creating chaos in the assembly by interfering with communication.”

Regarding the “silence” imposed on the disruptive women, since it is the exact same command used to impose silence on the tongue-speakers and on the prophets, it clearly should not be taken to mean a universal silence but rather one dictated by circumstances. As with the tongue-speakers and the prophets, where self-control and deferment to the needs of the congregation is the emphasis, Paul is commanding the Corinthian women (or wives) to “pipe down” and, in accord with verses 26 and 40, let everything be done with decorum and edification.

“LOOSE ENDS”

There are some other “loose ends” in this passage which, in the interests of time, I am going to tie up without going into much explanation. We can go into detail on these points in the Bible class.

Is Paul speaking here about women in general or wives? (Remember, the Greek word used could refer to either). The only clue we have is Paul’s admonition for the women to ask their husbands questions at home. My best understanding is that Paul is referring to wives, and especially those wives who are creating the problem.

To whom are the women/wives to be in submission, “as the law says”? Paul does not say, “Let them (the women/wives) be in submission to their own husbands.” He simply says, “Let them (the women/wives) be in submission, as the law also says.” Osburn remarks,

Women are not being commanded to “submit” to their husbands in this text, but to orderliness in public worship, to silence and respect when another is speaking.

This is in perfect keeping with the context of this passage, and also with I Corinthians in general, where people are not submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21) but are “doing their own thing” regardless of whether or not it builds up the church.

Finally, vs. 36-38 indicate that Paul is calling the whole Corinthian congregation to task.

Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached? Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not rec-

ognize this is not to be recognized. So, my friends, be eager to prophecy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order.

The Corinthians have no right to violate a principle of mutual submission and order that is recognized in all the churches. They cannot simply “march to the beat of their own drum.” Paul calls them to correct the verbal misconduct by tongue-speakers and prophets, and by certain questioning wives.

SUMMARY

Osburn sums up the passage this way:

The praying and prophesying in the assembly by the women in chapter 11 differs markedly from some wives continually “piping up” in the assembly in chapter 14. The patent insubordination which these wives had in common with that of the tongue-speakers and prophets called for Paul’s inclusion of this firm directive at this point in the text.

Paul’s corrective does not ban women from speaking in public; it stops the disruptive verbal misconduct of certain wives who are giving free rein to “irresistible impulses” to “pipe up” at will with questions in the assembly. Paul tells these wives to redirect their questions to another setting where they can gain access to information without causing chaos.

CONCLUSION

If there are reasons why women should not have speaking roles in the church’s public assembly, then they should not be derived from this passage. I cannot put that strongly enough. I am absolutely convinced of this from having studied this passage numerous times. If we make that application, then we are misapplying this text.

The next message in this series will be on I Timothy 2:8-15, where Paul mentions “authority,” a much deeper subject.

But based on a careful and responsible reading of I Corinthians 14:26-40, women are not prohibited from speaking in the assembly. Rather, they, AND ALL OTHERS, are prohibited from disrupting the assembly with their speech.

PRAYER

The Role of Women in the Church

Message #3

I Timothy 2:8-15

Women Who Reverence God

Matt Soper

6/29/97

INTRODUCTION

This is the third of four planned sermons over a four month period on the issue of the role of women in the church, which we are discussing as a congregation. In the first message we looked at women in Jesus' ministry, in the second message we looked at I Corinthians 11-14, today we are going to look at I Timothy 2:8-15, and in the next message, scheduled for July 20, I am going to offer some summary observations.

Our theme for this whole process is "Everything on top of the table." We want everything to be done honestly and out in the open. Recently a member shared with me her observation that even though she is experiencing some discomfort going through this process, she appreciated the general atmosphere of acceptance and love. We want Culver Palms to be a place where Christians can share their thoughts and feelings, openly disagree in some instances, and still love one another as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. The hallmark of the presence of Christ among us is not necessarily unanimity on every issue, but rather faith expressing itself through love.

I TIMOTHY 2:8-15 AND THE CITY OF EPHESUS

I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that regarding the role of women in the church, this passage has been the most influential. Richard and Catherine Kroeger, who wrote an entire book on this passage (*I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking I Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) note that,

"Many evangelical Christians view all biblical passages about the role and ministry of women through the lens of I Timothy 2:12. It becomes the key verse on women, the one on which all others turn."

As we have been discussing in our Sunday evening class on Inspiration, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible, it is imperative in biblical interpretation always to consider the context of a passage. The context of this passage is Paul's two letters to Timothy, whom Paul entrusted to work with the church in Ephesus. Because this passage is holy scripture, it is relevant and authoritative to our lives today as Christians. But it is relevant and authoritative **THROUGH** its original application to the church in Ephesus. When we find out what it meant to them, we can then consider what it means to us.

There is a striking prelude to I and II Timothy in Acts 20, where Luke records a farewell address Paul gives to the elders of the church in Ephesus. Paul says,

Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own

group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. (Acts 20:28-31)

Paul implies that one of the continuing things he did during his three years in Ephesus was instruct and warn the Ephesian Christians about false teachings. Of particular interest to us is the fact that in Asia Minor, where Ephesus was situated, and in contrast to other parts of the world, the primary deities were female. Whatever name they took, the Mother Goddess was seen to be the source of all life. And the most famous shrine of the great mother goddess lay at Ephesus, where she was revered as “Artemis.” The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world, and thousands of men and women served the goddess there. According to Kroeger,

“far more than most cities, the citizens of Ephesus derived their feelings of security directly from their goddess. On two occasions the inhabitants related the safety of the city directly to the intervention of the goddess. In summary, Ephesus stood as a bastion of female supremacy in religion.” (p.54)

It is not surprising that the gospel message was heard with much fascination in Ephesus, but also with much resistance. In one notable instance which is related to us in Acts 19:23-40, a silversmith named Demetrius organizes a riot by saying,

Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, AND SHE WILL BE DEPRIVED OF HER MAJESTY THAT BROUGHT ALL ASIA AND THE WORLD TO WORSHIP HER. (V.25-27)

Kroeger comments,

“The words of the town clerk make it clear that Paul had not leveled a frontal attack at either the goddess or her shrine. He says, “You know that these men are not temple desecrators nor blasphemers of our goddess”(v.37) “We suggest that Paul attacked the very basis of Ephesian religion. Rather than directing his opposition to a specific deity, he may well have engaged in a more widespread denunciation of the concept of the mother goddess as the source of all life. The silversmiths may rightly have perceived that he had launched an attack upon the divine maternal principle, the concept underlying the political, economic, and social existence of Ephesus.” (p.57)

I TIMOTHY 2:8-15 AND THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

Understanding this, we can proceed to Paul’s two letters to Timothy. What is Paul’s purpose for writing? He tells us right at the beginning.

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather

than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. (I Timothy 1:3-7)

Paul also says in 3:14-15,

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

We hold these two comments side by side. On the one hand, as he says in 3:14-15, Paul is giving Timothy a sort of handbook for church order, which would certainly have universal application. But on the other hand, as he says in 1:3-7, it is a handbook given in light of the false teachings and the problems that pervade the congregation in Ephesus, and we must read it that way. The problem with false teaching, and the destructive lifestyles this is causing, runs throughout the two letters.

I TIMOTHY 2:8-15

Let's move now to the immediate context of our passage, I Timothy. In the first chapter, Paul voices his concern about false teachers and false teaching (v. 3-7). Then he talks about the lifestyle problems that have resulted from this (v. 8-11). Then he points back to the error in his own life before he came to a knowledge of the truth (v. 12-17). And then he voices particular concern about Timothy's conduct, telling him to "fight the good fight" (v.18-20). In fact, Timothy's ability to handle the problems in Ephesus is a major theme of both letters. At one point Paul tells him,

These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophesy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers (I Timothy 4:11-16)

At another point he says,

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of discipline (II Timothy 1:5-7)

Paul is clearly concerned that Timothy be up to the task of restoring the church to health. And so instead of writing to the church, as he does in other instances, he writes directly to Timothy, to

encourage Timothy, but also to authorize Timothy before the church to carry out his task (Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*)

Chapter 2 begins the body of the letter, and the first fifteen verses deal with appropriate Christian behavior in worship. Paul says in 2:1-7,

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all — this was attested at the right time. For this reason I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

Paul is saying two important things here. First, the Christian message is for ALL people. Three times he mentions “everyone” or “all people.” The false teaching may have painted religion as very exclusive and inward focused, and Paul reminds Timothy and the readers that God wants “everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” And second, Paul mentions leading “a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” The word for “dignity” (Gk. “semnotes”) connotes moral earnestness and outward integrity to match one’s inward beliefs. In other words, if the Ephesians are not suspected of disloyalty to the state, they will be able to practice their lives without fear of disturbance and to lead the morally serious lives appropriate to it (J.N.D. Kelly; *The Pastoral Epistles*)

And this brings us to our passage, which is connected to verses 1-8 by the word “therefore/then.”

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument (v. 8)

It is hard to know for sure what Paul’s emphasis is here. Some have taken this to mean that men, not women, should pray. What seems more likely is that Paul is telling the men that they should PRAY, not argue. Paul refers in 6:4-5 to those who

“have a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words. From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth. . .”

I was in a church once where the adult Bible class was primarily a forum for three or four of the men to argue back and forth. It got so bad that many of the other adults stopped coming. I think that Paul is telling the men that when they get together to pray, they should pray, not argue. This corresponds to his desire just a paragraph earlier when he talked about Christians in Ephesus leading a “quiet and peaceable live in all godliness and dignity” (2:2)

Paul then continues,

(I desire) also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. (v. 9-10)

This idea of “modesty” (Gk. “sophrosune”) is important. Paul uses this word again in v. 15 when he refers to women “continuing in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”

The Jewish writer Philo, in his book, *On The Virtues*, says that such adornment as is described here, braided hair with gold and pearls, or even hair braided with gold and pearls, and expensive clothing, was associated with pagan temples and sexual promiscuity as well as with disrespect for the husband’s authority. Paul is very concerned with how the women in the Ephesian church are adorning themselves and also with how they are conducting themselves (the word rendered “dress themselves” [Gk. “katastole”] can mean either clothing or deportment). In 5:11-13 Paul castigates the young widows in the congregation, saying

But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say.

Paul tells the women that rather than adorning themselves with expensive clothing and jewelry, they should adorn themselves with good works, “as is proper for women who profess reverence for God.”

Then he continues the instruction regarding women.

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. (v. 11-12)

VERSE 11

We need to consider a couple of things about these two key verses. First, the word which is rendered “silence” or “silent” in some versions (RSV, NRSV, NKJV), and “quiet” or “quietness” in other versions (ASV, NAS) is the same word Paul uses at the beginning of the chapter to talk about leading a “peaceable” life in all godliness and dignity (2:2).” Paul obviously assumes that women are learning as part of the assemblies, and while he wants them to learn (unlike in Judaism; remember?) he is concerned with the manner in which they learn. His injunction for “peaceableness” (Gk. “hesuxia”) deals with their demeanor; he wants them to have a quiet spirit. He is not demanding total silence. When Paul wishes to specify silence he usually uses the word we talked about from I Corinthians 14 (Gk. “sigao”). And so peaceableness, not silence, is admonished here.

Second, Paul does not specify to whom the women are to be in submission. Some would say that they are to be in submission to all men, as the subsequent reference to Genesis would indicate,

though the passage to which they base this inference, Genesis 3:16, refers to husbands and wives. Others would say that women are to be in submission to their husbands, since the reference in Genesis is to a passage involving Adam and Eve. The first has no firm basis; the second may not go far enough. Submission is a dynamic within a community (cf. Ephesians 5:21; I Corinthians 14) as well as within a marriage relationship. Paul is probably thinking here primarily of the marriage relationship with reference also to submission to the leaders of the church (Thomas Geer, “Admonitions to Women in I Timothy 2:8-15; *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, Volume I, Carroll Osburn, Ed.)

VERSE 12

Paul is obviously not saying that women cannot teach. There are ample references to women teaching in the New Testament. The difficulty comes in understanding how the rest of this sentence fits together. There are two primary ways that have been suggested, both of them grammatically possible.

“I permit no woman to teach a man or to have authority over a man.
or “I permit no woman to teach authoritatively a man.”

You can see how differently these would be taken. Traditionally, in the churches of Christ we have gone with the first one. We have not allowed a woman to teach a Bible class in which a man (defined as a baptized male) is present. Curiously, with boys who have been baptized at age 8, 9, 10, 11, etc. we have often conveniently ignored this conviction. And we have not allowed women to do anything which might be construed as exercising “authority” over men. The idea of “authority” in the church is a deeper and more complex idea than teaching, and I will comment on it in a moment, but I remain puzzled as to how serving communion, praying, or reading scripture exercises authority over anyone; they seem to me to render service to people.

One of the particular difficulties in interpreting this verse is the fact that Paul does not use the conventional New Testament term for “authority” (Gk. “*exousia*”). He uses a word found nowhere else in the New Testament (Gk. “*authentain*”) whose exact meaning is hotly debated but which is generally conceded to refer to some kind of “domineering.” What is also generally conceded is that the King James translation of “usurping authority” is a poor one. Geer says,

“There is, in fact, no indication that Paul is concerned with women overstepping someone else’s “authority.” For years, the discussion has centered around that issue and it is simply not a part of Paul’s argument. Paul is just as against men domineering as he is women (e.g., Eph 5:21; I Cor 11:11,12). In Ephesus, he is facing the issue of domineering women. In a more general sense, it is inappropriate, in a church in which Jesus has been given all authority (Matt 28:19-20), for individuals to be overly concerned with power/authority issues” (Osburn, p. 294, note 39).

Geer argues (Osburn, p. 294, note 40) convincingly that a strong grammatical case can be made that “domineering” is something that is accomplished by teaching, so that the verse would be rendered,

I permit no woman to teach domineeringly over a man.

Referring to analysis of syntactical parallels to this verse in extra-biblical literature, in forty-eight citations that are syntactically parallel to the structure of this phrase, all of them express some type of parallelism between the first infinitive and the second (Geer, p. 294).

It would be like me saying to someone, “I will not permit you to scream at and insult my children.” The second verb, insult, modifies the first verb, scream. And so the second verb in 2:12, “exercise authority” or “domineer,” modifies the first verb, “teach.” Thus, “I permit no woman to teach domineeringly a man.”

This, in fact, accurately reflects the cultural context of the time.

The Greek view of teachers prevented “respectable” women from occupying that role. Greek education was centered around a master who had a deep, personal, extended relationship with his pupils. . . By definition he was an authority figure. The paucity of women teachers, then, is not surprising. Because of the authority inherent in the Greek conception of the role, women teachers would have been unacceptably domineering. They could not have been teachers and still have appeared to be the submissive figures society demanded them to be. (James G. Sigountes and Myron Shank, “Public Roles for Women in the Pauline Church: A Reappraisal of the Evidence [I Cor 11:2-16; I Cor 14:33-36; I Tim 2:8-15], JETS 26 (1983): 289)

VERSES 13-15

Paul then gives a basis for the instruction in v. 11-12. He says,

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

There are two ways to take this. The traditional view is articulated by Burton Coffman in his commentary on I Timothy.

Adam’s being the first formed, and having an existence before Eve was created, gave him priority in creation. Furthermore, Eve was created as his assistant and helper, one suitable for him; and if both Adam and Eve had respected this God-given arrangement, the human family might still have resided in the Garden of Eden. The disaster came when Eve became the leader instead of the helper and led her husband into the tragic fall of the entire race. But this is not all. Eve proved to be incapable of leadership, as outlined in the next verse (v. 14).

A more progressive view is articulated by Geer, following Osburn,

There is a structure to these 5 verses which cohere with the larger context. Though the false teachers have been deceived, the issue facing Timothy is the false teachers’ deception of the women. Because these particular women have been deceived

as Eve was deceived, Paul does not permit them to teach. Certainly, Paul would not want Timothy to allow the male false teachers to teach either, but that is an obvious point and not the concern here. In chiastic style (a b b' a') Paul bases his arguments for behavior among the Ephesian women on the Genesis material, not with reference to some inherent hierarchical structure as such, but on the events and how they correspond to the situation in Ephesus.

- a I am not permitting a woman to teach
- b nor to domineer over a man
- b' for Adam was formed first, then Eve
- a' the woman, when she was deceived, became a transgressor

Indeed, Paul mentions in II Timothy 3:6

those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

My opinion is that the second possibility is the more likely meaning in this context.

But I will tell you that I don't think we will ever have a healthy understanding of the role of women (or men?) in the church until we discuss the concept of spiritual authority. In the letter which our elders wrote this Spring to the members of Culver Palms, one of the things they said was,

We view the church as extended family. In the model family the husband and father is to lead the family. The principle of male family leadership applies to the church as an extended family. We have concluded that men are to have authority in the extended church family as elders. What is the definition of spiritual leadership? What is the difference between authority, leadership, service, coordination, and participation? These are examples of the perspectives of relationship within the church family which we need to discuss.

Historically, and almost uniformly, we have lumped together authority, leadership, some types of service, and even some types of participation. And we have almost always made "spiritual authority" to be simply the church equivalent to "power." One of the things I want to do in the last sermon in this series is talk about spiritual authority, because until we grapple with that, we will go around and around in circles on this issue. Allow me simply to say here that we have tended to view authority as a kind of static condition inherent in the genetic disposition of males, as opposed to being a dynamic privilege entrusted to people in a certain role, and that is the source of much of the present discontent.

My understanding is that spiritual authority is different from spiritual leadership. Anyone can, and should, exercise spiritual leadership when it is called for, and most do. How many mothers do not exercise spiritual leadership towards their baptized teenage son? How many older sisters do not exercise spiritual leadership towards their younger brother? Few refrain from such leadership because of gender differences. On the other hand, spiritual authority is exercised by God through the spiritual leaders of a congregation, the elders who have been appointed, hopefully, because of their

godliness and spiritual maturity. In this understanding, for instance, one church I know of adheres to the practice that women can do whatever the elders authorize them to do.

I don't have a perfect understanding of this. Perhaps you can even see theological problems in the above reasoning. But I remain convinced of two things: First, we will go around and around in circles on the issue of the role of women in the church until we take a deeper look at the nature of spiritual authority, and the difference between authority, leadership, service, coordination, and participation. And second, most of the time we equate spiritual authority with the secular notion of power, and that simply runs counter to the very character of the Lord in whose name the authority is exercised. Many people, unfortunately, can see the women's issue in terms of only one question: "Will we let women have the reins of power?" Shame on us for such shallow and secular thinking.

VERSE 15

Well, what about verse 15? First, this verse effectively rebuts anyone's contention that we don't have to interpret scripture, we just have to read it. How will the woman be saved through childbearing?! There are two primary possibilities for what Paul meant by this. The first is that despite Eve's transgression, Christian women will be saved through THE childbirth, i.e., the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The second possibility is that Christian women are not saved through teaching and domineering, but by paying attention to their traditional role, represented by bearing children. This second possibility seems to be the majority view, and fits the context better than the first. After all, Paul expresses elsewhere in the letter a desire for women to maintain their proper roles in their families. In 5:14-15 he says of the problem "younger widows,"

So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. For some have already turned away to follow Satan.

If this is what Paul meant, how ironic that in a time when women in our culture have moved beyond the traditional role in the home and into the workplace, and this has become accepted within the church, that we would still be arguing about whether a woman can read a scripture in the assembly.

CONCLUSION

It would be much easier for us (though far less compelling, I think) if the scriptures were simply a "How-to" manual for Christian living. We would open up to the section on worship, or teaching, or marriage, and just read what to do and what not to do. But God in his wisdom has seen fit to give us scriptures which, in cases such as Paul's epistles, reflect the church's struggle to be faithful and to further the gospel message. There is always relevance to us, but it is always relevance THROUGH their situation. The theologian Alistair McGrath has said that we have an obligation to respond to God as he has presented himself to us, not as we wish he had.

The problem of false teaching and the destruction it has caused in the church is a theme that is voiced throughout I & II Timothy. It is the reason Paul writes the letters (cf. I Tim 1:3-7). Appar-

ently, the false teachers had found an accepting audience among some of the women in the house churches, resulting in these women not only teaching erroneous information, but doing so in a domineering manner (Geer). It is not difficult to see how the problem of syncretism in the church was manifested in Ephesus: In a city which has been described as at the time “a bastion of female supremacy in religion” (Kroeger), where Artemis is the mother goddess whose majesty “brought all Asia and the world to worship her” (Acts 19:27), women who imported this religious understanding into Christianity would misunderstand the nature of authority and tend to domineer over men. Paul tells Timothy that the women should learn with a peaceable demeanor and in submission.

The way to combat false teaching is with good teaching. That is why Paul mentions teaching or teachers more than TWENTY times in I & II Timothy. That is why Paul says to Timothy,

These are the things you must insist on and TEACH. . . . Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to TEACHING. . . Pay close attention to yourself and to your TEACHING; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers (I Timothy 4:11-16)

The way to promote good teaching is to limit and carefully screen who is allowed to teach. One way to read this passage is that Paul is prohibiting women from teaching in Ephesus until the church is returned to health, since they have been particularly susceptible to the false teachings. Another way to read it is that Paul is simply prohibiting women from teaching domineeringly over men. But to read this as preventing women from ever teaching men in the church is not, in my opinion, a careful reading of the passage in its historical and literary context. And to use this text to limit women from participating in worship lest they “exercise authority” over men borders on silly.

That is a practice derived from mixing a questionable interpretation of I Corinthians 14 with a narrow interpretation of I Timothy 2, while ignoring I Corinthians 11 (“any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head. . .;” v. 5) and while using a different interpretative method (hermeneutic) for clear exhortations in the same passage, e.g., I Timothy 2 (“I desire that the women should dress modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes;” v.9). We can and must do better.

May God bless us as we wrestle with this difficult and emotional issue.

PRAYER

The Role of Women in the Church

Sermon #4

A Time for Courage

Matt Soper

July 27, 1997

INTRODUCTION

This is the last in a series of four sermons on the issue of the role of women in the church. Our theme for this whole process of study, discussion, and deliberation has been “Everything On Top of the Table.” Our goal has been to have everything out in the open so that we can discuss this issue in an atmosphere of love, acceptance, trust, and open disagreement when that is called for. I believe we have accomplished this for the most part, and I hope you feel that way too. There will always be things about which Christians disagree. The sign of a healthy church family is how people handle disagreements and frank discussions. The mark of Jesus Christ among us is not necessarily unanimity on every subject, but rather faith expressing itself in love. I believe that at Culver Palms we have and will continue to distinguish ourselves by the way in which we conduct ourselves through this challenging and emotional process. I am proud of our church family.

REVIEW

I want to review very briefly what we talked about in the first three sermons. In the first one, we looked at the role of women in Israel, first century Judaism, and in Jesus’ ministry. We saw a very striking thing. In the Old Testament, a wife was subject to her husband’s authority in the home, but was not seen as inferior to him. On several occasions God raised up women in public roles such as judge or prophetess, and this was not seen as a violation of her husband’s authority in the home. But by the time of first-century Judaism, women were seen to be inferior to men. Jesus repudiates this later development of Judaism not only by treating women with dignity and respect, but also by including them in his traveling entourage and by openly teaching them and involving them in his ministry.

In fact, the gospels fairly reverberate with Jesus’ inclusion of women, and the gospel writers, in particular Luke and John, seem to go out of their way to show how involved women were in Jesus’ ministry (e.g., Luke 23:49,55; 24:1-12; John 4:1-30; 11:17-27). This is particularly striking in John 11, when Jesus goes to the home of Mary and Martha after Lazarus has died and has a revealing conversation with Martha. She says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” In the course of the ensuing conversation in which Jesus tells her that he is the resurrection and the life and whoever believes in him will never die, he asks her, “Do you believe this?” Martha replies, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” It is almost verbatim the same great faith response as Peter gives to Jesus in Matthew 16, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This would have been unheard of in first century Judaism. I’m not talking about a woman having this kind of faith. I’m talking about the account being put in

writing and a woman cited as an example of great faith. The gospels and Acts shout a unified and coherent message that Jesus has brought a new order of relationships, one in which women make valuable contributions to the ministry and mission of the church.

In the next sermon we looked at I Corinthians 11-14. We saw from I Corinthians 11 that women are praying and prophesying in the assembly in Corinth, and the only objection Paul expresses about this is the way in which they are doing it, without wearing the customary veil which symbolizes in first-century Corinth personal modesty and respect for their husbands. Then we saw from chapters 12-14 that there is a problem with spiritual gifts in the assembly in Corinth. People are exercising their spiritual gifts ad hoc, without consideration for whether or not that builds up the whole group. There is general chaos in the assembly. Things are not being done decently and in order, as befits a God of peace. In particular, there seems to be an unhealthy interest in prophesying and speaking in tongues. And so in chapter 14 Paul gives very specific instructions to the three groups who are contributing to the disorder: tongue speakers, people who prophecy, and women who continually interrupt the proceedings to ask questions. Paul tells each of these groups to shut up if they can't abide by the conditions he gives. He does not tell them to shut up forever and in all instances. He tells them to shut up when they would otherwise contribute to the kind of discord that is a problem. When Paul says it is shameful for a woman to speak in church, we face an interpretative choice: He either means it is shameful for a woman to speak in all instances (which would include, for us, asking questions in Bible class and singing in worship), or he means it is shameful for a woman to speak in the way some women are speaking in Corinth. We cannot find a convenient middle ground on this one. And I believe the context clearly enjoins the second interpretation. When we have a problem with women speaking out of turn and disrupting the assembly, we ought to employ Paul's prescription for this illness. Some scriptures are vitamins to be taken daily. And some are prescriptions for specific illness. This is a prescription, not a vitamin.

In the third sermon we looked at I Timothy 2 in both its cultural and scriptural context. We saw that the church in Ephesus sits in the midst of a culture in which many of the primary deities are female, and in which women are seen as preeminent in some ways. We also saw that there is a huge problem with false teaching in the congregation, and that this is in fact the reason Paul writes to Timothy. In his instruction to "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man," I suggested that what Paul is doing is restricting the teaching role in the congregation in Ephesus to those who have a solid foundation in sound doctrine, in particular, to those who have not been deceived by the false teachers, as some of the women have (II Timothy 3:6). I also suggested that "to teach or to have authority" over a man is one function in first-century Ephesus, not two, and that teaching is the way in which women are domineering over men. And so Paul is either restricting women from teaching in a domineering fashion, or he is restricting women from teaching until the church can be returned to spiritual health. I see this, too, as a prescription for a specific illness, not a vitamin to be taken daily.

I also suggested that our understanding of authority is one of the sources of our misunderstanding of this passage, and I said that until we think through the nature of spiritual authority and distinguish between authority, leadership, coordination, participation, and service, we will never come to

grips with the deeper nuances of this subject. And I promised to talk more about spiritual authority in this fourth sermon.

And so that is where we left off. What I want to do today is talk about some of the reasons why this is such a sensitive issue, share with you some of my thoughts about the nature of spiritual authority, look at two scriptures that I believe speak to this issue, and then finish with some personal thoughts.

THIS IS A SENSITIVE ISSUE IN SOCIETY AS WELL AS IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST

First of all, we should understand that this is not just a sensitive issue in the churches of Christ. It is a sensitive issue in society. There is a pronounced uneasiness and uncertainty in our society about the role of women. On the one hand, women are now permitted to do almost all of the things that men do in the vocational realm. Women are doctors, lawyers, mechanics, soldiers, CEO's, professors, university presidents, professional basketball players, even professional boxers. But on the other hand, there are pockets of society in which the inclusion of women is being resisted. Typically, these are pockets which historically have been bastions of masculinity. One that comes to mind is certain areas of the military, such as elite fighter pilot assignments and elite Special Forces assignments. There is a movie coming out later this year starring Demi Moore entitled, "G.I. Jane," in which a woman is admitted to Navy Seal training as a kind of concession to political pressure but is expected to flunk out. When she doesn't, the fireworks start.

And the prevailing feeling in these pockets of society among some people is, "My goodness, women can do so many things, why is it so important that they do EVERYTHING?" "Women can fly most jets, why do they insist on flying F-18's?" "Women can be soldiers and sailors, why do they insist on being Navy Seals?" "Women can serve God in so many ways in the church, why do they insist on having speaking roles in worship?" Do you see the similarity? The anxiety in many churches is mirrored by the anxiety in society about the appropriate role of women.

But there are some specific anxieties which are unique to the church, and are even unique to the churches of Christ. I think it would be helpful for us to put these on top of the table.

COMMON FEARS UNDERLYING THE ISSUE OF EXPANDING WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE CHURCH

1. As long as I have been a Christian I have been a member of the churches of Christ. I love our fellowship and I have a deep respect for our heritage and our traditions. One of the anxieties I sense from some people about including women more fully in worship is that it will erode our identity as churches of Christ. In other words, for many people one of the primary characteristics of the churches of Christ is how different we are from other churches. And including women more fully, as many other churches do, is seen as losing part of our distinctiveness. In fact, I have concluded that there are five distinctives to the churches of Christ that many people regard as almost "pillars

of purpose.” In their minds, if we take one away then the whole house threatens to fall down. These five are:

- a. a plurality of elders who exercise spiritual authority in the local congregation
- b. celebrating the Lord’s Supper every week.
- c. baptizing by immersion for the forgiveness of sins.
- d. singing accapella
- e. excluding women from having speaking roles in worship.

I’ll be very frank with you. I think the first three are biblical, the fourth one is a valuable part of our heritage though not binding, and the fifth one is a misinterpretation of scripture and a convenient way to maintain the status quo. But there is a deeper issue here: Is our mission simply to be distinctive from other churches? It seems to me that our mission is to be distinctive from the world, and to be like Jesus.

Dropping the fifth of these five distinctives of our heritage does not affect the other four at all. Many people have anxiety about the “slippery slope.” If we stop excluding women, then we’ll eventually start having instrumental music, and then we’ll change this and then we’ll change that. That is an argument I reject because it is based on fear. Listen, the “slippery slope” concept is a valid one, it is a real phenomenon. But EVERYTHING could be subject to the slippery slope argument if we let it be. I worked a few more hours than normal this week, with

Angela’s blessing. The slippery slope argument would say, “Don’t let him work any extra hours, because before you know it he’ll be working seven days a week and neglecting his family.” We enslave ourselves when we become paralyzed by this argument.

2. Another anxiety I have sensed is this one: If we allow women to participate more, then the men will get lazy and eventually stay home. This also is an argument based on fear. I, for one, have more confidence in men than that. And my experience has shown me that men who are spiritually lazy usually stay spiritually lazy. If they are spiritually discouraged by women at all, it is not because of what women do in public, it is usually because of what happens in private .

3. A third anxiety I have sensed is this one, and I want to be careful how I put this. And I want to tell you that it was a woman who pointed this out to me. In any congregation, there are women who exercise a great deal of influence behind the scenes. There is often a kind of charade that takes place. The men get together and make the decisions, but the decisions aren’t really ratified until these influential women sign off on them. It is a very dysfunctional system. By bringing women out into the open as full participants, we dismantle the dysfunctional system and disarm these behind-the-scenes people. And that causes a great deal of anxiety among those who are used to the old way of doing things.

Note: Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that if someone does not want women to be more fully included in worship and other ministries, then their motives are fearful or bad. I am

simply saying that these are a few anxieties I have noticed in going through this process. Let me say that I have been continually surprised and impressed by people who have displayed very honest motives and intentions, who simply want to do what the scriptures say and live squarely in God's will. And often these people disagree with me quite openly. But I appreciate their open hearts and their willingness to wrestle with this issue.

OTHER STRONG INFLUENCES

And that leads me to another conclusion I have reached as a result of going through this process. How one sees this issue depends a great deal on how one views God and how one views scripture.

VIEW OF GOD: If one views God as being very concerned with the form of our worship and our ministries, then one will assume that God is very displeased when we don't do worship or ministry "right." On the other hand, if one views God as being more concerned with the condition of our hearts in worship and ministry, then one will assume that doing worship and ministry "right" is not so much a matter of who serves in what role, but rather is a matter of our reverence for and praise of God. Of course, things should be done decently in order. There cannot be chaos. But by and large, this second view sees worship as more a matter of function than of form.

Now, neither of these views is completely right or completely wrong. There is a balance. But where one falls on the spectrum between the two extremes determines to a great extent how one views this issue. I happen to believe, based on my reading of the prophetic books of the Old Testament and of the gospels, that God is much more concerned with the condition of our hearts in worship than with who passes communion plates or prays or reads scripture. And I would even say that an excessive preoccupation with who passes communion plates or prays or reads scripture REFLECTS a condition of our hearts.

VIEW OF SCRIPTURE: Just as there are two extremes of viewing God, there are two extremes of viewing scripture. On one end is the view that scripture is a how-to-manual for Christian living, given by God for us to follow. In this view, 1st century language, culture, and world views make very little difference in how one reads scripture. The scriptures are inspired by God and we should follow them verbatim.

On the other extreme is the view that the scriptures are so culturally conditioned that they often don't apply to us at all. Each of these is an extreme. Again, there is a balance. But where one falls on the spectrum between the two extremes determines to a great extent how one views this issue. I happen to believe that the scriptures are "inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the one belonging to God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (II Timothy 3:16). But I believe that they function for us in this way THROUGH their original intent to their original audience. And therefore, knowing first century language, customs, and world views, while not ALWAYS necessary, in some instances is imperative for understanding the original intent.

ANXIETY (CONT)

4. And that brings me to an anxiety that I have heard voiced often. What about the people who don't know Greek, and don't know about first century Ephesus, and don't know about ancient religions? Does that mean they can't understand scripture? My answer to that is, Of course they can understand scripture. But there are certain very difficult questions and issues where we do the scriptures an injustice to say that we don't have to do any background work to understand them. Maybe we don't have to know Greek, but we do have to pick up some commentaries written by people who do know Greek. Maybe we don't have to know all about first-century Ephesus, but we do have to pick up a Bible dictionary and read a two-page article about first-century Ephesus that tells us what we need to know to begin studying I Timothy 2. The very importance of the scriptures demands that we acknowledge their depth, complexity, and occasional difficulty.

5. Let me talk about one more anxiety I sense from some people about this issue. That is the anxiety that if we make changes, we are declaring that everyone in the past has been wrong. One of the things this assumes is that there has been unanimity in the past. This is not exactly true. Yes, it is true that for the most part our heritage has practiced an exclusion of women from having speaking roles in the public assembly. Until the last half of this century, this was a practice that was completely consistent with society in general and therefore did not grate on many people. But even during this time, the scholars and teachers in our tradition were not unanimous on what the scriptures permitted women to do. David Lipscomb took a strong stand against any expanded role for women. J.W. McGarvey, on the other hand, felt that Peter's citation of fulfilled prophecy in Acts 2 ("your sons and your daughters shall prophecy") and the evidence of women and men praying in I Corinthians 11 admitted of exceptions to Paul's commands in I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2. C.R. Nichol, one of the most influential preachers in Texas in the late 19th century, affirmed women being subject to their husbands but did not see I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2 as prohibiting women from leading in worship. Even Burton Coffman admitted that Paul's admonition to "Let women keep silent" should not be arbitrarily enforced "beyond the theater of its first application." Does this mean these men would have recommended that women read scripture in the assembly? Of course not. But they had reservations about making blanket assertions based on Paul's statements to particular churches with particular problems.

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

I said I would talk a little today about spiritual authority. I certainly do not claim to have complete understanding of this. It is a huge subject, far beyond the scope of this message. But I would like to call our attention to what I perceive to be the difference between spiritual authority and spiritual leadership. At the risk of oversimplifying, my understanding of spiritual authority is that it is given to someone, whereas spiritual leadership is earned by someone. Let me explain. In Matthew 21:23 we read, "The chief priests and the elders came to Jesus as he was teaching and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" They ask Jesus this question because he is teaching as a rabbi but does not cite a rabbinical teacher under whom he trained and by whom he has been given the authority to teach. They want to know, "Who gave you the authority

to speak and teach about God?” Jesus, of course, says on many other occasions that his authority is from God.

But that is the nature of spiritual authority. It is given to people to exercise certain roles. And if they are not exercising the role, they do not have the authority. As I said in the last message, authority is not something that is inherent in the genetic predisposition of males. It is something a man is given by God in relation to his wife in the role of husband. It is something men are given by God through the trust and selection of a congregation in the role of elders. It is given to someone to exercise a certain role. A man who steps down from his role as an elder, let's say perhaps because of the illness of his child, may still be the same spiritually mature, wise, dedicated Christian he was before he stepped down, but he no longer has the authority of his role. He may still exercise spiritual leadership, but that is because he has earned it through the trust people are willing to place in him and by the example he sets. Do you see the difference?

Now listen closely. Someone can have spiritual authority and exercise no spiritual leadership. Unfortunately, some husbands demonstrate this. We have been given spiritual authority in relation to our wives, to love them and nurture them and provide spiritual direction and guidance for them. It is the spiritual authority given to us in our role of husband. But because of our lack of example and effort, we really don't exercise much spiritual leadership.

A man might have spiritual authority in his role as an elder and exercise no spiritual leadership. On the other hand, a person might not have spiritual authority because they do not have a role to which authority has been given, but they exercise significant spiritual leadership through their example and spiritual maturity and through the trust people are willing to place in them.

I believe that spiritual authority resides in the role of husband in the home and in the role of elder in the church. I believe the preacher as we know it evolved from the elder in the New Testament but that is another subject for another day. Let's just say for now that spiritual authority in the church resides in the elders. But spiritual leadership can be exercised anywhere by anyone because it is dependent on their spiritual character.

When Paul says at the end of his letter to the church in Rome, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae. . . for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.” And “Greet Mary, who worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my compatriots who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Romans 16:1-2,6-7), he is citing three women and a man who have earned their spiritual leadership by their hard work and suffering for the gospel.

Women can and many women do exercise spiritual leadership, not because anyone gave it to them in a certain role, but because they display the spiritual vitality and maturity and example that makes others willing to trust their opinions and instruction. I have asked the question before, Is passing communion trays or reading scripture or praying in the worship assembly really spiritual leadership, or is it participation or even service? My feeling is that even if it is spiritual leader-

ship, it is okay for women because spiritual leadership is different from spiritual authority. Women exercise spiritual leadership in many ways already and to deny them the opportunity to do so in the worship assembly strikes me as petty and insecure. It strikes me as being more about turf than about scripture.

ACTS 2:17-18 AND GALATIANS 3:27-28

There are two texts I want to look at briefly which, in my opinion, give us an idea of the kind of radical change the coming of Christ brought to human relationships and spiritual roles. The first is Acts 2:17, when Peter addresses the crowd following the amazing irruption of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He quotes from Joel 2:28-32, saying,

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS shall prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

Peter is clearly saying that the last days have arrived, that God’s final act of salvation has begun to take place (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*; Tyndale Commentary Series, 1980). God will now be pouring out his Spirit on ALL people, not just upon the prophets, kings and priests. And both men and women will prophecy. Later in Acts 21:9 we read about an evangelist named Philip, who had four unmarried daughters “with the gift of prophecy.”

The second scripture is Galatians 3:27-28, where Paul says,

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.”

The language of this passage emphasizes the difference between the old age of the law and the new age of faith. It is striking that Paul says “neither Jew NOR Greek, neither slave NOR free, neither male AND female.” Some have suggested that this is an allusion to Genesis 1:27, which says that God created us “male AND female.” Paul may be implying that Christ has not only delivered women from the curse but has also brought them into a new relationship in the new creation — a relationship that transcends that of the original creation. (Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present*; Zondervan, 1987)

But whatever the case, each of these scriptures suggests an ideal advanced with the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God which Christ brought. It is God’s agenda beginning at that time and to be finished in heaven. It was not accomplished immediately. Distinctions between Jew and Gentile were a major problem for the first two centuries. Even Peter, who preached the sermon, had to be dragged kicking and screaming into God’s agenda for including the Gentiles. He even quotes scrip-

ture to God in protest! (Acts 10:14) It took nineteen centuries for the distinction between slaves and free to be brought down. It didn't happen easily. Christians in the South quoted scripture to defend slavery: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ." (Ephesians 6:5), and "Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it." (I Corinthians 7:20-21). Even after slavery was abolished in the United States, for a hundred years we resisted integrating churches, not because it wasn't right, but because we wouldn't change our way of thinking. And now after twenty centuries the ideal of "no longer men and women" is coming to realization. We have resisted it because we couldn't change our way of thinking. We couldn't read I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2 with our eyes opened because we were conditioned to see what we had been taught to see. But the time is here. It is time for the walls to come down and the double standard to cease.

PERSONAL THOUGHTS

When the elders asked me to preach these four sermons they made it clear that they wanted me to preach my full convictions. They did not try to influence in any way what I said. I appreciate their trust. And I hope I have balanced my full conviction through these four sermons with a full measure of love. This is an important issue because the time has come to act on it. But I truly believe, as I have said many times before, that equally important to the course of action we choose is how we treat one another and conduct ourselves as a church family through the process. And I am very proud of our church family for the way we have conducted ourselves.

I entitled this sermon "A Time for Courage," and I want to explain to you why. First, let me tell you what I am not saying. I am not saying that if you disagree with expanding women's roles in the church then you are a coward and you lack courage. As I said before, I know several people who have been through the class and taken notes on the sermons and studied on their own and they still don't see it. They still do not think it is right to make any changes. And I respect their opinion. I do not agree with it but I respect it. And I respect the kind of attitude they have shown. I honor that attitude. And there are certainly many other people, scholars and teachers among them, who study the same scriptures I have and come to a completely different conclusion. I respect that.

The reason I say it is "a time for courage" is because my experience has been that for every person who has studied the scriptures hard and come to a firm conclusion that women should not have full participation, there are five whose reservations are based on fear. And that is why I say it is a time for courage. We cannot be governed by fear. Fear paralyzes people. There is too much fear in the church. It is robbing us of the power of the Holy Spirit, who is a Spirit not of timidity but of power and love and discipline (II Timothy 1:7). What if we lose our identity? What if men get lazy? What if it changes the dynamics of the worship assembly? What if this, what if that? Beloved, God is bigger than our "what if's?" The most significant question for us is, What is the right thing to do? I believe there is a moral imperative to expand women's roles because we have bound their participation much tighter than the scriptures did even in the first century, and in light of the expanded roles of women in the 20th century, it is getting more and more harmful and painful to behold.

I have heard people at times express the following sentiment, “I’m not completely sure that the scriptures demand that women’s roles be restricted the way they are now. But it’s better to be safe than to be sorry.” Is it being “safe” to deny half a church family full participation in the church’s ministry? Not in my opinion. Is it being “safe” to let our daughters grow up being told they can be anything they want to be and work hard enough to be, but they can’t read a scripture in the church’s worship assembly? Not in my opinion. Is it being “safe” to try to reach a lost and hurting world with the gospel message while practicing a kind of hierarchy that makes the church look chauvinistic and out of touch to most unchurched people? Not in my opinion.

I for one would rather meet God and find out that we erred in allowing too many people to participate fully, than to find out that we erred in allowing too few people to participate fully. And I close by asking you this question: Which one was Jesus criticized for?

May God bless us as we wrestle with this and strive to live as courageous people of God.

PRAYER

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

Class Leader: Roland Sundling
Culver Palms Church of Christ
June 1, 1997

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

Framework for Discussing Issues in the Christian Community

A discussion class on applying Biblical principles to the contemporary issue of faith and gender. We will examine the impact of culture, history, assumptions, and traditions on our understanding of the issue. We will discuss the rules of interpretation which are the basis for discerning the purpose of God. We will examine how four different views of the issue (including the assumptions, hermeneutics, common features, strength, and weaknesses of each view) impact our understanding of the relevant Biblical texts. Please join us as the dialogue continues.

- ***Framing the issue***
 - Identifying the issue
 - Cultural impact
 - Historical impact
 - Biblical impact
 - Bounding the issue
 - Communicating the issue
- ***Methods for selecting option(s)***
 - **Assumptions**
 - Implicit
 - Explicit
 - **Traditions**
 - From man
 - From God
- ***Examining the options***
 - **Attitudes**
 - An open mind to the truth
 - Willingness to discuss issue
 - **Authority**
 - Bible
 - Judgment of elders
 - **Rules of interpretation**
 - Literary controls
 - Historical controls
 - **Open forum for discussion of issue**
 - Allow all to participate on a fair basis
 - Make discussion materials available
 - Develop issue resolution vision
- ***Implementing change***
 - Vision statement
 - Schedule of changes
 - Periodic report on progress toward vision

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What are the implicit assumptions in the following issue statements? Are they well-framed?

Why should men and women be treated as leaders exactly the same based on educational achievement?

Why should men be preferred over women for all religious offices in the congregation?

How does God intend for men and women to serve in all congregations to glorify Him?

The Bible means literally what it states for all time and all places.

How does God intend for men and women to serve in our congregation to glorify Him?

How do roles of men and women differ in our congregational life?

Should Christian ministry, which by all testimony of Scripture is *spiritual* in nature, be limited by the gender of the minister, which is by nature a *human* distinction?¹ (Hint: Gal. 3:28)

Can a person hold to the apparent restrictions Paul introduced and at the same time deny that one's gender has some relation to ministry?² (Hint: 1 Cor. 14:34, 1 Tim. 2:12)

Based on the phrase "women and ministry"...: (1) How does gender affect ministry? And (2) How does the nature of ministry affect women's roles?³

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What are some common assumptions from everyday life?

A wife grew up in a family where Father was in charge of packing the suitcase cases in the car trunk for car trips. The husband was raised in a family where Daddy did not appear until everything was loaded into the car and all family members were aboard. These differing assumptions resulted in a pile of luggage at the front door while two people waited for each other to fulfill their expectations. Who was making the correct assumption in this case?

An atheist, humanist, or naturalist concludes that all processes can be completely understood through natural laws. The Christian (supernaturalist) has a world view which conceives of power or forces outside the realm of natural laws. How would these individuals view miracles in the Bible? What is the reason for the different conclusion?

What are some common assumptions with respect to faith and gender?⁴

It is impossible to be a feminist and still hold to the inerrancy or even the infallibility of Scripture.

The ideas of Christian feminists come from secular sources.

Christian feminists relativize the Scriptures, making them subservient to culture.

Scripture being *subject* to culture is the same as Scripture *speaking* to culture (i.e., Paul's teaching is culturally determined, but his evangelism is culturally directed).

Traditionalists believe women to be inferior to men.

Feminist ideas have caused illicit sex, abuse, and the breakdown of the family.

Presuppositions in Biblical Study⁵

Presuppositions are far more influential in New Testament scholarship than disagreements over method.

Stanton observes that one must distinguish between the personal factors which affect the judgment of the interpreter (prejudices) and the philosophical or theological starting point which

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an interpreter takes and which he usually shares with some others (presuppositions).⁶

If one's prejudice is so deep-seated that a conclusion is reached before the evidence is considered, then prejudice renders the accurate understanding of a text impossible.

Presuppositions, on the other hand, are pre-understandings that are neutral with respect to historicity and prejudice.

While presuppositions cannot be avoided, they must not be allowed to dominate the text, but to serve as doors through which the text is approached...and as guiding principles which are continually adjusted in terms of interaction with the text.

Preliminary Definitions

Egalitarianism advocates that all men and women should have equal political, social, economic, and religious rights.

Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning as the original recipients were to have heard it. This requires an understanding of their language, culture and the specific situation addressed.

Hermeneutics in general includes the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis. In the narrower sense hermeneutics seeks to determine the contemporary relevance of the ancient texts or what is the Bible's meaning for us in the "here and now"?⁷

Hierarchy - (1) a system of church government by clergy in graded ranks, (2) the grouping of persons arranged in order of rank, grade, class, etc.

Descriptive - certain passages describe what existed in the 1st century whether the situation was approved or not.

Prescriptive - other passages give instructions that pertain to solving a particular local problem and should not be taken as general instruction for all churches in all times.

Exercise for the Student

Please define authority, obedience, subjugation, subordination, submission, deference, respect,...

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*WOMEN IN THE CHURCH: REFOCUSING THE DISCUSSION*⁸

Extreme views: Radical Feminism vs. Paternalism
Moderated views: Evangelical Feminism vs. Complementarianism

Radical Feminism (Extreme view)

Assumption: Egalitarianism (equality of sexes) using lessons learned from experience

Abuses addressed: victimization, oppression, “glass ceiling”, inequitable pay, sexual exploitation, sex objects, harassment, pornography, low self esteem, lesser being, dependent on others for self definition

Advocates:

- Experience rather than the Bible, places little or no reliance upon the Bible and views Scripture as essentially masculine and therefore suspicious.
- Equality via full expression of talent, restoration of full humanity
- Abolish hierarchicalism - rejection or reconception of God
- Sexual freedom, free sex, freedom of choice of sexual orientation, abortion
- Power, control of society

A fatal flaw in radical feminism is that it tries to form a negative theory (prejudice against males) out of hurt and negative experience and claims universal validity for it.

Paternalism (Extreme view)

Assumption: Hierarchicalism in home, church, and society is a function of Order of Creation - God / Christ / Man / Woman

Common features:

- Strong emphasis on following the Biblical text
- Aversion to rampant cultural degradation in society
- Emphasize male leadership and responsibility
- Emphasize feminine characteristics of loving, kindness, serving, etc.
- Male dominance/female subjection (maintain differences between male & female as classes of individuals) - place limitations on women. All men as a class rule all women as a class. A man should be in authority over women in the home, church, society, and the work place.

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- Strong emphasis on the home
- Environment conducive to emotional and physical abuse of women

Hermeneutics:

View Bible as blueprint or “pattern” in terms of scientific objectivity

- direct command⁹
- necessary inference
- approved apostolic examples

Weaknesses:

- “proof-texting” (concordance preaching) assigns meanings to the text that do not withstand rigorous analysis.
- All verses are equal in importance (flat view of scripture)
- Oblivious to the cultural influences which have shaped their view: 19th century industrialization
- Respond to the modern world by isolating themselves from culture

Evangelical Feminism (Moderated view)

Assumption: Egalitarianism (equality of sexes)

Common features:

- Accepts the Bible as the standard of faith and practice, but maintains that texts used by hierarchicalists to place limitations on women have been misunderstood
- Critical re-analysis of all pertinent scriptures

Hermeneutics:

- Approach exegetical work with strict literary and historical controls
- Attempt to understand the Bible in terms of its historical milieu
- Biblical literature - descriptive vs. prescriptive

Weaknesses:

- Application of hermeneutics is often immature
- Dependence on experience if text violates assumption

Complementarianism (Moderated view)

Assumption: Hierarchicalism in home and church, but view women as full participants in church life

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Common features:

- Equal Value of men and women
- Male leadership/female submission in family (husband and wife)
- Male leadership/church submission in extended family (elders and members)
- Scope of male leadership determined by the relationship (family or extended family) which is not class based (e.g., all women submissive to all men)
- Diverse roles for men and women in church life with the exceptions of church administration and preaching
- Let Scripture challenge traditional patterns of behavior
- Reject Paternalism because it overemphasizes structured authority while giving no suggestion of equality or mutual interdependence

Hermeneutics:

- Approach exegetical work with strict literary and historical controls
- Attempt to understand the Bible in terms of its historical milieu
- Biblical literary form and purpose varies - descriptive vs. prescriptive

Weaknesses:

- Hierarchicalism does not apply in secular society

Commonality of Evangelical Feminism and Complementarianism:

- Committed to working out a view of women within the historic Christian faith
- View Bible as authoritative
- Approach exegetical work with strict literary and historical controls
- Attempt to understand the Bible in terms of its historical milieu (social or cultural setting)
- Understand that culture has influenced the church, both past and present
- Presuppose equal value of the sexes
- Acknowledge discrimination and oppression of women, both in society and church
- Theoretically find radical feminism and male domination unacceptable
- Theoretically have a willingness to evaluate own view and interact with other views

Differences between Evangelical Feminism and Complementarianism:

God-ordained egalitarianism vs. God-ordained hierarchicalism

These differing presuppositions strongly influence both the selection of scriptures to be used to support arguments and the exegetical conclusions of each group.

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

BIBLICAL TEXTS ON WOMEN

Genesis 1-3

Evangelical Feminism

Both men and women are made “in his own image.”

Women, like men, were to ‘subdue’ the earth and have ‘dominion’ over it.

Gen. 2 relates a separate creation story.

Purpose for parading animals before Adam was to demonstrate that no lower form of life would adequately complete him.

Gen. 2:23 ...she was taken out of man, i.e., made out of the “same stuff”, and therefore equal.

Nothing suggests that “helper” indicates she was created as “secondary” to man in a hierarchy, God referred to as “helper”.

“Helper” rather denotes “precision” in fitting the needs and deficiencies in man.

Satan approached Eve not because she was gullible and weak but because Adam improperly taught the prohibition to Eve.

Gen. 3:16 “He shall rule over you” comes as a result of the Fall and was not part on God’s original intention.

Christ came to free humankind from bondage to sin, i.e., the curse of sin that began in Gen. 3.

Complementarianism

Gen. 1:27 indicates man and woman are both created in God’s image and neither is a lesser being.

Gen. 2-3 shows God’s pre-Fall intent was that man should provide leadership and woman should honor that leadership as man’s submissive helper.

Gen. 2: 7—a point underscored in 1 Tim. 2:13, that man was created first, then woman.

God gave moral instruction which was not repeated for Eve, leaving Adam responsible for providing leadership (Gen. 2:15-17).

Gen. 2:20 woman was created as a “helper,” a suitable assistant in the garden—implying male leadership.

Gen. 2:23 man “names” woman implying male leadership.

Satan’s temptation of the woman involved urging her to usurp the role of spokesman and leader (Gen.3:1) which was specifically his role (Gen. 3:17).

Male brutality is a post-Fall matter, both roles were corrupted by pride and self-sufficiency.

Jesus evidenced a very high view of women, he returned the roles of headship and submission to their original purity (Eph. 5:22-23).

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Commonality of Evangelical Feminism and Complementarianism:

Both men and women are created in the image of God - no superiority is attached to maleness and no inferiority is attached to femaleness.

Man was incomplete (lonely), woman was created to complete or complement man (Gen.2:19-20). The primal sin of Adam and Eve was about "power".

Neither Gen. 1-3 nor the whole of Genesis is about manhood or womanhood, but about God, sin, and redemption.

ALL VERSES ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

Distinguish between the central core of the biblical message and what is peripheral to it.
[Contrast holy kiss and resurrection.]

Within guidelines set by the central core, determine the relative emphasis of a given topic.
[Compare foot-washing and baptism.]

Distinguish between normative teachings and descriptive narratives.
[Compare Luke 12:33 and 19:8-9 on material wealth.]

Note when a teaching on a particular point has a uniform and consistent witness and when there are differences. When there is different terminology, emphases, or structure, cultural relativity becomes more possible.
[Compare love and prohibitions against homosexuality with woman's role as teacher.]

Distinguish between principles and applications.
[Note 1 Peter 2:18-21 on slavery.]

Intra-canonical principles of reversal may be indicators of cultural and/or historical relativity.
[See Matthew 10:5-6 and 28:16-20.]

The degree to which a writer agrees with a cultural situation in which there is only one option increases the possibility of cultural relativity.
[Note more than one option regarding resurrection and homosexuality, but basically one option on slavery and women.]

Compare the biblical setting with our own cultural setting. Significant differences may uncover culturally-limited applications of biblical texts.
[Contrast attitudes then and now to democracy in Romans 13:1-7.]

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*JESUS' VIEW OF WOMEN*¹⁰

Jesus' View of Women in Evangelical Feminism

Jesus evidenced a very open attitude toward women as He:

- allowed women disciples (Luke 8:1-3);
- engaged women in theological discussions (John 4:1-42);
- treated men and women alike with regard to the faith and their foibles (Luke 7:1-17).

Women are described as:

- being among those who took care of him (Matt. 27:55);
- gave intimate gestures of love (Matt 26:6-13);
- remained at the cross when most males had fled (Luke 23:27-29);
- were first at the tomb (Matt. 28:1-10);
- bore first witness of the resurrection (Mk. 16:11);
- listed among those foremost in proclaiming the Christ (Rom. 16).

Without sentimentality, condescension, or undemanding indulgence, he accepted them as persons.

Jesus did not include women among the Twelve because the logistics of women assuming that role were impractical and would have scandalized and obscured Jesus' true mission.

Jesus' View of Women—A Complementarian View

Hierarchicalists point out that Jesus did not speak to the status of women in Judaism per se and conclude that Jesus must have approved of the cultural status quo of his time regarding hierarchicalism.

Jesus did indeed place a high value on women in a world in which women were regarded as second-class citizens. The world-view which depersonalized women was a deviation from God's intent.

Jesus:

- viewed women as created in the image of God just as men are (Matt. 19:4 quoting Gen. 1:27);
- advocated equality of men and women with respect to divorce (Matt. 5:32, 19:9);

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- viewed women as genuine persons, not simply as the objects of male desire or as property (Matt. 5:28);
- served the needs of men and women alike, whether physical or spiritual.

Jesus accorded women dignity by:

- illustrations in his teaching (Matt. 12:42);
- teaching women theological truths (Matt. 24:41; Jn. 20:17-18);
- having women participate in his life and ministry (Jn. 11:20; 12:2-8; Lk. 8:3).

Women:

- were initial witnesses to the resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10);
- labored with men in the early church (Acts 16:14-15; Rom. 16).

Women were not included among the Twelve—fear of scandal was not the reason for He:

- criticized Pharisees in public (Lk. 14:1-6; Mk. 1:21-27);
- ate with sinners (Matt. 9:11);
- boldly cleansed the temple (Jn. 2:14).

The only reason for selecting an all-male group of twelve was emphasis upon maintaining God-given role distinctions regarding leadership. When a replacement is sought, it is stipulated that he be a male (Acts 1:21).

Men were:

- leaders (Acts 2:14; 5:12,18,40,42; Gal. 1:17);
- ruling over the “twelve tribes of Israel” (Lk. 22:30);
- having a special teaching ministry (Jn. 14:26);
- selected and qualified as leaders (Acts 6);
- in different roles than women who followed Christ or were served by him.

Summary and Critique

Similarities about Jesus’ View among Evangelical Feminists and Complementarians:

Jesus is commonly viewed as not addressing directly the status of women, but as holding a high view of women in a world where they were often viewed as second-class.

Jesus:

- held both men and women were created in the image of God (quoting Gen. 1:27);
- helped both men and women on an equal basis;
- taught theological truths to both men and women;
- included both men and women in ministry.

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

Women are acknowledged:

- as the initial witnesses to the resurrection;
- having worked alongside men in the early church.

Differences about Jesus' View among Evangelical Feminists and Complementarians:

Evangelical Feminists see Jesus as differing with prevalent Jewish hierarchicalism and replacing it with mutual respect and acceptance.

Complementarians see Jesus as approving of hierarchicalism beginning in Genesis 1.

Complementarians stress the absence of women among the Twelve while Evangelical Feminists argue the logical impracticality of their inclusion.

Egalitarianism or hierarchicalism remain presuppositions to exegesis rather than conclusions.

The Impasse Requires Refocusing the Discussion: What is a Responsible Christian View of Women?

We must note that Jesus did not address the topic specifically:

- great respect must be given to that silence;
- great care must be exercised before attributing any particular view to him.

Questions about the understanding of women by Jesus:

- are appropriate and proper;
- must not press modern agendas onto the text;
- must allow the Gospel narratives to inform the modern question;
- must extract historical understandings of the writer and participants from the narrative;
- must apply rigorous exegetical scholarship in a responsible manner.

It must be remembered that an explicit doctrine of women is not stated in Scripture, nor does Jesus attempt to provide such a doctrine.

Jesus does provide clear insight into the ancient intent of God as to how “people” are to be treated.

A responsible quest for the “mind of Christ,” then, is the primary task for the Christian community, a task that must not be displaced, circumvented, or manipulated in the quest of the “role” of women in the church or any other similar issue.

“Women in the church” is not at the heart of the Christian message—God’s calling all people to Himself through Christ remains the central venue, and the context for all other discussions.

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

*BEYOND THE IMPASSE*¹¹

Gal. 3:28 “Neither Male or Female”—An Evangelical Feminist “Magna Carta”

Jewett¹² terms Gal. 3:28 the “Magna Carta of Humanity,” and sees in Gal. 3:28 a restoration of the original relationship of man and woman before the Fall (Gen. 1:27).

Any restrictions placed on women elsewhere in the Bible should be read in relation to Gal. 3:28, and not vice-versa.

- Some egalitarians assume that Paul wrote neither 1 Tim. 2 nor 1 Cor. 14:34-35. They classify 1 Tim 2 as pseudo-Pauline and dismiss 1 Cor. 14:34-35 as a non-Pauline interpolation¹³.
- Others, noting the developmental nature of Pauline thought and biblical theology, view Paul as inconsistent. As he was both a Jew and a Christian, Paul’s thinking about women simply reflects both of these experiences.¹⁴
- Snodgrass¹⁵ argues Gal. 3:28 is at the heart of Paul’s theological concern and cannot be relegated to the periphery. “I view 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as statements necessitated by specific problems in Corinth and Ephesus, respectively, and as shaped by an ancient culture. These texts do not become less important than Galatians 3:28, but they are less direct in their application.”

Gal. 3:28 in Complementarian Thought

Complementarians argue that in this text Paul is only addressing salvation in Christ and that to go beyond this violates the text.

- With regard to Gal. 3:28, Johnson¹⁶ says, “the vigorous debate over sex roles has, in effect, lifted it from its exegetical underpinnings and set it as a lonely text, a kind of proof-text, in the midst of swirling theological debate.”
- Gal. 3:28 is viewed through the lens of texts outside Galatians in harmonizing fashion,

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

essentially relying on the “order of creation” argument and texts traditionally applied there. All texts which speak of women functioning in some capacity are reconciled with the “order of creation” by reinterpretation.

- The women’s issue touches the believability and applicability of portions of God’s word.” Hurley¹⁷ says, “The authority of Scripture is the issue which is finally under debate.”

Great stress is placed on the argument that distinctions in role function do not necessitate lesser value and that submission does not necessitate inferiority—yet complementarians have not been successful in responding to the challenge of evangelical feminists that “it is nonsense to insist on female subordination while simultaneously insisting that such subordination does not imply inferiority.

Summary and Critique

Rather than providing a responsible exegesis of the text in its context, complementarians have concentrated on harmonization and appeals to biblical inerrancy and to traditional interpretation.

Hailey¹⁸ provides the most compelling explanation of Gal. 3:28:

- argues that Paul’s reference is not to roles, but to worth;
- understands the verse to refer to primary identity in Christ as a corrective to the way Galatian Christians are treating one another;
- all three pairs in the verse signify an unequal relationship with potential for oppression;
 - each pair has a stronger and weaker partner in terms of power
 - there are distinctions within each pair that lead either to social or religious consequences, or both.

While the salvation of Gentiles is evidently strong among the readers, the question of salvation for women and slaves seems not to have been as issue. So the use of the slave-free and male-female examples was to strengthen the arguments for Gentile salvation.

Hailey’s theological conclusions are commendable:

- Christ is the defining point of life;
- all in Christ are of equal value which does not imply equality of roles (perceived worth is as important as actual worth);
- unity among groups in the Christian community will:
 - eliminate unnecessary barriers and distinctions;
 - supplant hostility with reconciliation and mutual responsibility.

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

Women in Appointed Roles—Phoebe¹⁹

Deaconess, female deacon or servant (Rom. 16:1)?

- NIV, NASB - "...servant of the church..."
- RSV - "...deaconess of the church..."
- NRSV - "...deacon of the church..."
- NEB - "...who holds office in the congregation..."
 - Masculine form of the noun was used to refer both to males and females during the NT period.
 - Feminine form, referring to an official church position, dates no earlier than the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

Specific type of service (Rom. 16:2)?

- NIV - "...has been a great help to many people..."
- NASB - "...has also been a helper of many..."
- RSV - "...has been a helper of many..."
- NRSV - "...has been a benefactor of many..."
- NEB - "...has herself been a good friend to many..."
 - The Greek term used here is normally translated "patron" which means much more than mere domestic service.
 - There is a second century (AD 112) reference to female "deacons" in Bithynia.

Summary

Phoebe was a "deacon in the church at Cenchrea" in the sense of designated "servant" as well as a "patron" of Paul and many others. "Whatever the 'deacons' were at Philippi, that Phoebe was at Cenchrea."²⁰

Women in Appointed Roles—Female Deacons (1 Tim. 3:11)²¹

Two main arguments in favor of "wives of deacons" are:

- Women is too general of a term.
 - NIV, NEB - "...their wives..."
 - NASB - "...Women..."
 - RSV, NRSV - "...The women..."
 - The Greek manuscripts do not read "*their wives*" or "*the women*," but "*women*."²²

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

- Why does the discussion return to male deacons in v. 12?
 - If deacons' wives are meant, v. 11 would be expected after the reference to marriage in v. 12. What about qualification of elders' wives?
 - Transition in vs. 1 emphasizes three groups: elders, male deacons, female deacons.
 - Parallelism between the four items in vv. 8-10 and the four in v. 11.
 - Worthy of respect...worthy of respect
 - Sincere...not malicious talkers
 - Not indulging in much wine...temperate
 - Not pursuing dishonest gain...trustworthy in everything

Summary

Deacons, whether male or female, were not officers, but “designated servants.”

Brain Teaser: How much parallelism is there in the “service areas” of “designated servants?”

Faith and Gender: Refocusing the Discussion

CLASS RULES

- Please write your questions on a note card which will:
 - Allow the class to consider your question in the a relevant discussion context;
 - Prevents loss of insightful questions;
 - Allows all to participate on a fair basis.
- Please wait to be recognized by the class leader before proceeding to contribute to the class discussion.
- Please contribute articles from periodicals, books, research reports, etc. which may added to the curriculum of this course.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Clouse, Bonnidell & Robert G., ed. *Women in Ministry: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989): 127.
- ² Ibid.; 127.
- ³ Ibid., 130.
- ⁴ Ibid., 131-134.
- ⁵ Ibid., 67-71.
- ⁶ Stanton, "Presuppositions in NT Criticism," *New Testament Interpretation*, 61.
- ⁷ Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982): 22-27.
- ⁸ Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion* (Abilene: Restoration Perspectives, 1994).
- ⁹ J. D. Thomas, *We Be Brethren: A Study in Biblical Interpretation* (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1958): 6.
- ¹⁰ Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion* (Abilene: Restoration Perspectives, 1994), 83.
- ¹¹ Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion* (Abilene: Restoration Perspectives, 1994), 87.
- ¹² Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, 142.
- ¹³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987): 699-708.
- ¹⁴ Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, 112.
- ¹⁵ Snodgrass, "Gal. 3:28," *Women, Authority & the Bible*, 180.
- ¹⁶ S. Lewis Johnson, "Role Distinctions in the Church: Galatians 3:28," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 154.
- ¹⁷ Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, 204.
- ¹⁸ Jan Faver Hailey, "'Neither Male and Female' (Gal. 3:28)," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (ed. Carroll D. Osburn; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993): I, 130-166.
- ¹⁹ Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion* (Abilene: Restoration Perspectives, 1994), 90-93.
- ²⁰ C. H. Dodd, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1932): 235.
- ²¹ Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion* (Abilene: Restoration Perspectives, 1994), 94-95.
- ²² Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Refocusing the Discussion* (Abilene: Restoration Perspectives, 1994), 94.

CULVER PALMS Church of Christ
9733 Venice Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90034-5196

March 1, 1998

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

As you know, our congregation has been concerned with the issue of gender and faith for the past 20 years or so. Over the last three years, in a quest to understand God's will, we embarked on a journey toward a fuller understanding concerning the appropriate role of men and women in the church.

In the Fall of 1995, the elders and Matt began studying and discussing the scriptures. During the Spring quarter of 1996, Matt and the elders taught bible classes. During the Fall of 1996, we had informal conversations with most members of the congregation to solicit your thoughts and feelings. In April of 1997, we wrote you a letter outlining a process for continuing the journey. This letter presented our feeling that the scriptures permit greater participation by women in the public worship assembly of the church and in the general ministry of the congregation.

Our major goal was then, and will continue to be, to go where the Holy Spirit leads as gentle shepherds guiding "a unified congregation toward a biblical understanding of the role of women. Our challenge was to ask not just what is permitted but also what will build up the congregation. We concluded the year of 1997 in dialogue with as many members as possible, using additional sermons by Matt, an ongoing series of adult bible classes, and Care Group discussions. Finally, in November 1997 in a series of less formal open meetings, we met to discuss how we could continue to collaborate as brothers and sisters to find solutions which will allow us to maintain peace and unity as a community especially when we don't all agree.

Now we are prepared to implement future steps along the journey. It is our deep conviction that greater inclusion of women in our worship assembly and other ministry areas is scriptural and thus God's will for our future at Culver Palms. We will continue to study, question, talk and pray about what the scriptures teach on faith and practice for years to come. But we feel the church is prepared to move toward achieving the goal of focusing on God in our worship service and ministry programs rather than on the identity of the person serving. Accordingly, we have prayerfully decided that, beginning on June 1st, we will add a second worship assembly on Sunday morning to begin moving towards this goal.

The additional assembly will move toward including women in the following ways:

- serving communion at the Lord's table;
- making formal announcements;
- reading the assigned scripture;
- leading the congregation in prayer;
- baptizing converts;
- and leading the congregation in singing.

This is our best effort in response to the competing concerns of wanting to do what is right by our conscience as dictated by our understanding of the Bible, and wanting to hold together our congregation as a body of believers. As we move toward greater inclusion of women we do not plan to run rough shod over the consciences of any member of our church family. We believe the hallmark of a biblical Christian community is not unanimity on every issue, but rather faith expressing itself in love. Consciences are the result of training, education and habit. The practices in our existing worship service will be maintained. To eliminate surprise, the details for the second worship service will take shape as we receive input on the coordination, timing and other logistics from the deacons, ministry coordinators, worship task forces and members of the congregation. It is our greatest hope and prayer that not a single member will feel compelled to look elsewhere for a church home as our journey continues.

We are very proud of you, as members of our church family, for the way you have handled what is for many an unsettling process. We commend you for your commitment. We are privileged to be of service to you in the Lord. And we ask you to continue praying for our congregation and working to help us grow and thrive in the Lord's service. As we look towards the remainder of 1998 and beyond, we want to highlight several areas of our congregation's ministry that we want to focus on:

- our Care Groups are now a fully functioning part of our church's ministry. We want to give our full commitment to this ministry in the years ahead so that every member will participate in the discipleship and encouragement of Care Groups and so that people will be brought to Christ through them.
- our children's and teen ministries is growing and thriving under the capable ministry leaders, coordinators, and teachers who are working with our children. Our vision is to have a children's and teen ministry that not only equip our children and families for lives of strong faith, but also serve evangelistically to draw the unchurched.
- our marriages are enriched and focused by vibrant new ministries. We commend the Marriage Mentoring ministry for endowing new marriages with

the experience and maturity of mentor couples. We look forward to the upcoming series, “His Needs, Her Needs”, to be offered on Sunday evenings, to help equip one another for strong and healthy relationships which give witness to the love of Christ among us.

- our community services ministry, including our Life Skills Lab, will enable us to invest in our community by modeling the example of Christ towards those with specific needs,

- our core missions of the church, evangelism and outreach. We are blessed to have Shifan Man and his family to work full-time in our Chinese language outreach ministry to join our Korean and Spanish speaking ministries. We are in the process of looking for another full-time minister to work in the area of evangelism and outreach.

We remain excited about the future of Culver Palms and hope you can be excited also. The Lord has blessed us to have so many gifted and committed Christians in our church family. We again ask for your prayers and your support as we honor God through our worship and our ministry together.

In Christ,

your elders

“They Rejoiced at the Exhortation” – Acts 15:1-40

Tom Bost - March 29, 1998

I want us to consider together how can we maintain unity in the church, even though we have doctrinal differences. Let me tell you a couple of stories. About twenty years ago, I was with a group of young people. At that time I was one of those, here at Culver Palms, and we were sitting around eating dinner, and talking and somehow the topic got into capital punishment. It was kind of a light conversation, but at one point in the conversation, I said something very sensitive, like, “Yeah, I’d be glad to pull the switch; I think they ought to fry.” Something to that effect. A sister in the congregation, who was a very good friend of mine, about my age, looked at me with a look of absolute horror on her face. She clouded up, she started sobbing, and ran off crying, “Only God can take a life”. We had a deep doctrinal difference, on maybe the most important thing on which you can have a doctrinal difference: is it right or is it wrong to take a human life? This is a very deep conversation in Churches of Christ, and for many years, her point of view was by far the majority; in fact our Church, back in the early part of the century, was a “peace” church. Most of our people were pacifists, they would not fight in war, they would not take life, even as capital punishment for a heinous crime.

It’s interesting, but the swing of opinion in the Church is now the other way and it is not something that we talk much about anymore. But this was a doctrinal difference. She said that the Sixth Commandment, “You Shall Not Kill,” forbade the State’s killing of criminals. She said that the verse in Leviticus, “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord,” (Leviticus 19:18, Romans 12:19) says that God will take care of that person at some time; it’s not up to us. Well, my point of view was based on doctrine, too. My point of view was that the Sixth Commandment, when it says, “You shall not kill,” is talking about unauthorized killing. As a matter of fact, you can see that the very God who gave that commandment authorized his people to carry out capital punishment in all kinds of situations. Now, we disagreed about the most fundamental thing that you can disagree about in this life, but you know, we maintained fellowship in the Church. Despite our deep differences, we maintained fellowship. How did we do that?

Well, first of all, we loved each other. We accepted each other. I regarded her as a person made in the image of God, and she regarded me that way too. We accepted each other as brother and sister.

Second, we agreed on the basics of the Christian faith even though we had this deep doctrinal difference. Now, there’s the rub, because we often disagree about what are the basics of the Christian faith. But, let me direct you to Ephesians 4, where Paul writes to a group of Christians at Ephesus, who were ready to argue about things, as most of us are. I think that is the human condition. And he writes in verses 1 and 2 about leading a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called with all humility and gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, and then he gives seven great unities around which to build unity of fellowship. He said there is: “one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all . . .” (Ephesians 4:4-6, NRSV). So, Diane and I agreed on these unities. We held these things in common, and we maintained fellowship and friendship, even though we disagreed on this most important issue.

Third, and very significantly, the issue that divided us was not one that affected how we conducted church on Sunday morning. I think that those are the most difficult issues that we have, and there is a slight irony, maybe a major irony, that we can agree to disagree on something as important as when you take someone’s life, but have problems on whether you can clap during a song in Church, for example.

Let me tell you another story. This one happened much longer ago; I can't remember exactly where it was, I was about nine or ten or fourteen, or somewhere in that range. I was with my family, on vacation in Colorado. We were a little bit late, and we went into this little Church, and the Church was basically full, and so we have to divide up -- my Dad was over on one side, I was kind of in the middle with my brother, and my Mom, I think, was over on the other side.

We got ready for the Lord's Supper, and when the bread was prayed over and passed, everything was normal, from my experience. But I noticed that when we got ready for the cup, that we had the communion trays, as we are used to having here with these little bitty individual cups, and next to it was a big silver goblet, and it was full of either wine or Welch's grape juice, I'm not sure. And, so they prayed over the fruit of the vine, and then to about two thirds of the audience, the trays were passed with the little individual cups, but to the group of people over on the left side of the auditorium, maybe 25 or 30 people, the big silver goblet was brought. And each of them drank out of that goblet. I remember that so well because my Dad was in that group. My Dad was, respectfully, a cleanliness nut. You know sometimes you go to somebody's house, and they get ready to eat and all hold hands and pray to the Lord. In that situation, my Dad would always find an excuse to get up and go wash his hands again, because he was just a cleanliness nut. My Dad's devotion to the Lord and the privilege of taking the Lord's Supper overcame his great distaste for drinking after 25 strangers as he drank out of that goblet. I think that's why I remember that incident.

Now, how many of you here have heard of the "one-cup" movement in the Church of Christ? A number of you have. This is a movement of some significance. I understand that there are still about 500 Churches of Christ around the country that are a part of this movement. There is a doctrinal difference that separates most Churches of Christ with those brothers and sisters. The basic question is: how do you follow the Bible pattern? You know we try to do Bible things in Bible ways, and so we do, in fact, try to follow the pattern in the New Testament. The question is: what is the pattern?

Our friends, the one cup brothers and sisters, say, "Well, the pattern is clear: "Then he took the cup, [not "cups"] gave thanks and offered it to them saying, "Drink from it [not "them"] all of you." (Matthew 26: 27, NIV). Jesus never authorized multiple cups. Now, those of us in the multiple cup persuasion believe that this view overlooks the central issue of the Lord's Supper. The focus is on the elements which remind us of the body and blood of Christ, not on the receptacles, but what is in the receptacles, and that is focusing on kind of the form and not on the substance. We say, as a matter of fact, they didn't have song books or church buildings or pews back then, etc. etc. etc. And, furthermore, this is not visitor friendly. Who wants to come into a church and drink after fifty people you don't know?

Now, this is a serious doctrinal difference. I don't make light of either side of it. You know which side I'm on because I am a member of this Church, and we have multiple cups. But this is a serious doctrinal position held by serious people.

How did those brothers and sisters in that small church react to that conflict over doctrinal issues; how did they solve it? Well, there are several approaches to conflict and disagreement:

One is competition, the majority wins, and that is usually the way it is, frankly. Usually, if you have more multiple coppers than one coppers, the one coppers have to leave, and vice versa.

You can avoid it, you can just say, "Well, there's not a conflict." But it's very difficult to do that when you're talking about things that happen in the worship service. You can't really avoid this because the person who believes in one cup is going to violate his or her conscience when he drinks from the small multiple cup.

You can compromise, both sides giving up something, and this has actually been tried in places, and so, for example, you could have a one cup Sunday and then a multiple cup Sunday, and so on. But notice what happens in this situation: it is very difficult to compromise on matters of principle, because every other week somebody is going to be violating his or her conscience.

You can accommodate and let the other person have his way. If the one cuppers allow the multiple cuppers to have their way, they are violating their conscience.

Or you can collaborate to find an imaginative solution. Now, this is all circumstantial evidence, I wasn't there when the people in that little church were analyzing the issue, but this is apparently what they did. They said, we can solve this problem. We can stay as brothers and sisters in this congregation, we can preach to the lost, we can help the needy, we can love each other, I can be at your bedside when you're sick, you can be at the funeral when my mother passes away, we can do everything that a family does, and we can work together. And we can have one cup for the one cuppers and we can have multiple cups for the multiple cuppers. Looking back at it, I think that that is a model that can be instructive to us.

Now the third story is also a true story, more important, actually, than the first two. It's in Acts 15, and I would invite you to find a Bible and turn to Acts 15. Gary read verses 1 through 11, and I'm going to read most of the rest of this chapter.

What we had here was a serious doctrinal dispute among Christians. The question was whether the Church would bind the Jewish rite of circumcision on new non-Jewish Christians, whether Gentiles would have to be circumcised in order to be Christians, but it involved much more than this.

"Some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees [these are Pharisees who became Christians] stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised, and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'" It is clear, if you look at Romans 14 and 15, that some Jewish Christians wanted to impose on all Christians, Jews and Gentiles alike, the Jewish religious law, including (i) Jewish dietary rules, the rules of clean and unclean food, (ii) Jewish religious calendar, special feast days and days of special observance, and (iii) the rite of circumcision. They wanted to require that these things be kept.

Now, not only was this a doctrinal point, but a fundamental issue of fellowship. So, we have both doctrine and fellowship in conflict here. Strict adherence to the Jewish rites of circumcision and dietary rules would make it hard, very hard, for Jewish Christians to have anything to do with, to have any social interaction with, non-Jewish Christians, because you never knew who was clean, and who was unclean. So, there would be no table fellowship, no potluck, no getting together in anyone else's house, no fellowship in any meaningful sense of the word. Now in verses 1 through 10 you can see that there is a sharp disagreement. Now, that's a "pattern" in the Church, and we have maintained that pattern to this day. We still have sharp disagreement. Verse 7 says there was much debate and here we have a church that is on the verge of splitting into a Jewish church and a Gentile church.

I also want you to note verse 21. This is not just an isolated problem, this is a pervasive problem that affects a lot of people: "For in every city [this is James talking] for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues." This was not a point of view that affected just one or two brothers or sisters. By the way, this is one of the most difficult things for elders to deal with, because with virtually everything that happens in the Church you'll find one or two people, or a very small group, who conscientiously object to it. For example, we clapped today in Church. Some people conscientiously object to that. We have the Lord's Supper and the offering back to back. Some people conscientiously object to that. Matt is a "located" preacher who is paid. We had a brother who left

this Church because he conscientiously objected to that. He thought that the brothers who were solid citizens, like him, should be doing the preaching. We have had people who have conscientiously objected to responsive readings, where someone reads and the congregation responds.

Now, in each of these situations, the objectors formed a very small group. My point is this: it is very difficult, in any kind of organization, to give one person or two people, essentially a veto power over what 300 people do. But, that's not the situation we had at Jerusalem. We had an entire body of Christians who had inherited a centuries-old tradition of observing the Jewish law. They could not understand responding to God, even through Jesus Christ, without keeping the Jewish law. So this affected a lot of people in the church.

Now, I'm going to read verses 12 through 31. It's a long reading, but I really wish you would follow along with me.

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James [probably the Lord's brother, one of the elders in the Church at Jerusalem] replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon [talking about Peter] has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles to take from among them the people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins, I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles, over whom my name has been called.'"

He says that the prophets foretold of the time when Gentiles would become Christians. Now, verse 19.

"Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication, and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."

So they wrote a letter. In verses 22 and 23, they sent the letter out by Paul and Barnabas. And I'll begin in the middle of verse 23; this is the letter that they wrote: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, Greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth." [And here is the admonition.] "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When the members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

Four things were accomplished here, brothers and sisters. First, legalism was rejected. Second, fellowship was promoted. Third, conscience was respected. Fourth, unity was celebrated. Lets go over those quickly.

First, legalism was rejected. The elders decisively rejected the attempts of some Jewish Christians to impose on all Christians the requirement to do the works of the law. Verse 11 makes it very clear that we are saved by grace and not by works.

Second, fellowship was promoted. Now, there are really no commands in the letter. Look carefully at verse 28”“for it has seemed good . . .” This is the considered opinion of the Jerusalem elders, with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Elders still have the Spirit’s aid today, through our prayer, through our reading of the Word. So, the Holy Spirit working through the Jerusalem elders as they gave their advice, solid, sober advice, to the Gentile Christians. And what is this advice? Do those things which will allow table fellowship. Observe the Jewish dietary laws, so that you can eat in their houses and they can eat in your houses. That way you can have fellowship and be a family. And then, as kind of a sidelight, they said, don’t engage in sexual immorality. A lot of commentators think that this admonition was as much for the Jews as for the Gentiles. The Jews led a very upright moral life. The Gentiles were known for sexual immorality. The word among the Jewish Christians may have been “the Gentiles will bring their sexual looseness with them.” So this is to reassure everyone that the Church will maintain God’s strict moral standards. The primary focus of this, though, is to restore fellowship. Do those things which will allow you to get together as family should. Now, I think this was collaboration to a creative result: Gentiles, please give up these things so that you can have fellowship with the Jewish Christians.

Third, conscience was respected. Notice what is missing here, or anywhere else in the New Testament that I can find. There is no command to the Jews to stop observing, as a part of their Christian faith, the Jewish rites of circumcision, the keeping of special days, keeping of kosher food laws, and so on. As a matter of fact, it appears that they kept on observing those things as Christians, all the way through the New Testament period. (See Romans 14-15.) Never were they forbidden to keep those things. That was part of their service to God through Jesus Christ. What they were forbidden to do was to bind them on other people who did not have the same conscientious convictions on those matters. So, the conscience of the Jewish Christians was respected, because they were not told to quit doing things that as a matter of conscience they felt they should do.

You know, there was great diversity of opinion on matters of religious conviction allowed in the New Testament church. Jewish Christians observed the Jewish laws and customs; Gentile Christians did not, except where it was necessary to promote Christian fellowship. Both were forbidden to bind their opinions on each other. Look for a second at Acts, chapter 21:17-25. I’m not going to read all of this, but this is very interesting. What we see here is that the apostle Paul, who wrote the most vehement words forbidding Jewish Christians from imposing Jewish ceremonial or dietary requirements on Gentile Christians, himself observed the Jewish laws. Now this is very interesting. Paul is back in Jerusalem, and the brothers welcome Paul and Luke warmly in verse 17. Paul goes to visit James and tells him what was happening in his ministry. Then, verse 20: “When they heard it, they praised God. Then they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews,’” [how many thousands of Jewish Christians there are, that’s what they’re saying] “and they are all zealous for the law.” They are Christians, but they keep the law.

“They have been told that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or

to observe the customs.” [The food laws, the special days.] What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them.” [That is a Jewish religious rite.] “and pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus, all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, that you yourself observe and guard the law.”

They will find out that the rumor that you don't keep the law is false, and they'll know that you do keep the law, Paul. And, he went ahead and did it. My point is this, there was great diversity in the early church in practice and in matters of conscience. Conscience was not impinged on. The Jewish Christians were forbidden to bind their opinions on the others and vice versa.

You know, this great diversity of practice in the New Testament church sometimes surprises us. I think, in fact, that the New Testament Church is more diverse than our churches are today. The Jews did not have to leave their Jewish ways in order to be Christians. The Gentiles did not have to adopt Jewish ways in order to be Christians.

Fourth, unity was celebrated. Acts 15:31: “When its members read [the letter from the Jerusalem elders], they rejoiced at the exhortation.” This was the reaction of this Gentile church at Antioch.

They rejoiced in the two freedoms that had been confirmed. First, freedom from the law. Second, freedom from disunity and discord. Now, what is the basis of Christian unity? I think that we would call the New Testament Church a church of unity. But, the basis of the unity was not agreeing about every point of doctrine. In fact, it is very clear they did not agree about every point of doctrine. There were wide differences of opinion among the Church on points of religious doctrine in the first century. Nevertheless, Jesus prayed in the upper room that all who believe in him can be one (John 17:20-21). “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, [I am asking not only on behalf of the apostles, who are gathered here, but everybody who comes after. That's all of us.] that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us.” So Jesus prays that we will be “one.”

Max Lucado gives a very nice commentary on this passage:

“Of all the lessons we can draw from this verses, don't miss the most important one: Unity matters to God. The Father does not want his kids to squabble. Disunity disturbs him. Why? Because “all people will know that you are my followers if you love each other.” (John 13:35) Unity creates belief. How will the world believe that Jesus was sent by God? Not if we agree with each other. Not if we solve every controversy. Not if we are unanimous on each vote. Not if we never made a doctrinal error. But we love each other.

“Unity creates belief. Disunity fosters belief.”

(Lucado, In the Grip of Grace, p. 163.)

My own view is that Max is right. The basis of unity is love, mutual respect, for if we respect each other, then we will accept each other; accept each other for who we are. And it's not in agreeing on every point of doctrine. I gave a test when I was teaching a young adult class about ten years ago. I set out a number of controversial issues involving matters of doctrine. There were about fifty people in the class, and I

then started drawing lines. Well, if we had to part fellowship because we disagreed on an important point of doctrine, out of fifty people in the class, not one of those persons would be able to worship with any of the others, because everybody disagreed with somebody on some important point of doctrine. None of us could have worshipped with any of us because if unity was based on agreeing on everything, we were just not going to find it. And I want to submit to you that the New Testament church didn't find it either. No, unity is based on love, mutual acceptance, mutual respect.

There is so much evidence for this in the New Testament. For example, take Romans 14 and 15. The Church in Rome is a church that is about to split into factions based on observance of days, and religious dietary rules. Some are observing one day more highly than others, this would probably be the Jewish Christians, some thought all days were alike and there should be no special religious holidays. Further, they were having trouble about clean and unclean food, so the church is about to split because of these matters of doctrine.

What does Paul say to them? Well, he says several things, but I would like to read Romans 14:1-2 from Eugene Peterson's paraphrased version called The Message. He starts this way when he is talking about this problem.

“Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with -- even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.”

And then he closes the discussion in chapter 15, verse 7, when he says: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” (NIV)

Now the purpose of these remarks is to give you a context for the elders' request that we move to two services in June. We have significant doctrinal differences in this congregation over the role of women in the worship assembly. Some, as a matter of conscience and sincere conviction, believe that it is wrong for women to be included in the public assembly to any greater extent than they are now. This is the predominant view in the Churches of Christ. It is not the exclusive view, but is certainly the predominant view in our fellowship, and has been for many years. Now, others of you, as a matter of conscience and deep and sincere religious conviction, believe that it is wrong for women not to be fully included in the public assembly. It appears this particular view had wider acceptance back in the early days of our movement, in 1800 to 1860 or 70, but has not been in the predominance in the last hundred years or so. The point is, that we have a significant number of members who, as a matter of conviction, hold diverse views on this point. Is it inevitable that one group or the other will have to be forced out of Culver Palms? We don't think so. Now, we pondered this for a long time. I mean, our process has been open, and many of you are very tired of the process by now, but for three years it has basically been a public process, and for many months, we agonized over this, wrung our hands, and came to a conclusion after a lot of disagreements, and a lot of discussion and a lot of prayer, and a lot of back and forth. We believe that it is possible to work together for God's glory in West Los Angeles, to take the Gospel to people outside of our building, and care for those who are hungry and needy, to care through the Life Skills Lab for those who want to step up in life, to send missionaries throughout the world, preach the Gospel in the Chinese, Spanish and Korean languages right here in this building. We believe it is possible to do all that, to love each other, to be with each other in times of illness, and sorrow, and times of happiness. We think we can do all of that even though we have deep doctrinal differences among the members of the church here at Culver Palms.

Now, two services is just one of the ways to do that. Two services, we believe, and we pray, will allow us to do that. If we approach the idea creatively, two services can bring a lot of benefits to Culver Palms. They can give us choices. They give us choices of time, choices of worship experience, they can give us diversity, they can give us convenience. They can improve our parking situation, which is already tapped out. They are much more visitor friendly, and more outreach oriented. People out there want choice. They don't necessarily want to conform to our set times. This gives us more choice.

Now, we had two services at Culver Palms before. We did it from 1984 to about 1991. And this was precisely our experience back then. We did it for a principled reason back then too. The principle reason then was we wanted to grow. We wanted to welcome people into our building, and we had a completely full building, a much smaller one than this one. And back then, we approached the idea of two services with a lot of fear and misgivings. We were afraid of splitting up the church, we asked, "what will it do to our worship experience?" All these are very legitimate questions, the same questions that are being raised right now for all of the right reasons. But it turned out to be a very positive experience for us. I think most of us who lived through that believed that that was an excellent chapter in the life of this church. And this can be too. It will be if we allow God to work through us, and if we keep our focus on the people who are outside this building who need to be brought into the Lord's Kingdom. So we respectfully request that you give it a chance to work, that you approach it openly, and most importantly, that you approach it prayerfully. Would you pray with me.

Our Father, we thank you for your great blessings. You're a good God. Father, we ask for unity. We ask for unity based on love.

We ask for unity based on adherence and strong belief in those seven ones that Paul talks about in Ephesians chapter 4. Father, we ask that we will see our brother or sister as a person for whom Christ died, a person whom Christ loved and valued highly, and Father, help us to value each other highly. We ask your blessings on this church, Father, to move ahead, that your will will be done in this place, at this time, and at this hour.

In Jesus name we pray. AMEN.