

Women Leadership in the Church

Should women be ordained pastors in churches? Before the actual discussion of women ordination, it would be prudent to narrow down the scope of this paper, for there are many types of ordination (e.g. deacons, elders, pastors, priests, missionaries, etc.) as well as the method or practice of ordination. The meaning of ordination of priests and pastors also vary greatly. Anglicans and Catholics view priests, as a “Priesthood of Christ,” as having sole authority to pronounce absolutions, preside over sacraments and preach the Word. Ordination is the giving of the spiritual gift and tenure to the order beyond the professional or office positions.¹ Free churches view pastorship as a call to a particular office to serve a function among many within the unity of the particular local church.² Ordination of pastors is simply “the church's assent to God's command.”³ Thus for the purpose of this paper a common ground needs to be defined by which ordination of women ministers can be discussed. Some common underlying concerns seem to be whether women may teach, preach and lead in the public arena of church worship and governance. Of course, there are differing concerns such as over absolution and sacraments that the Anglicans and Catholics may care more about than the free churches. But, they seem to all boil down to the question of whether women can have overall authority over their churches. It is over this general question that the following various writers make their cases for or against women leadership. The following discussions will present the two opposing views within the framework of precedence and theology.

Original Precedence

God's original precedence can be discussed in the context of Genesis 1-3.⁴ Those opposed to women leadership in churches insist that from the beginning God created man and woman to be equal in value but different in roles. Dan Doriani argues that Adam was formed first then Eve (Gen 2:17-24; 1 Tim 2:12-14), thus God intended males to lead from the beginning (even before the Fall), and women

¹ Lloyd G. Patterson, “Women in the Early Church: A Problem of Perspective,” in *Toward a New Theology of Ordination: Essays on the Ordination of Women*, ed. Marianne H. Micks and Charles P. Price (Alexandria, VA: Virginia Theological Seminar, 1976) 23-37; George William Rutler, *Priest and Priestess* (Ambler, PA: Trinity Press, 1973) 77-91.

² Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998) 246-251.

³ Aida Besancon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry*. Nashville (TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985) 97.

⁴ Unless otherwise specified, all biblical quotations will be from the English Standard Version.

were to serve as helpers. Therefore, "if man led woman from the beginning, then men should also lead the church." Furthermore, "ancient Near Eastern culture, listeners would assume that because God created Adam first, Adam led the relationship. Primogeniture - leadership by firstborn - was the way of the world...When God creates both man and woman in his image, we see their equality. When God creates the man first, we see man's leadership."⁵ However, the Old Testament gives evidence of firstborn preferences (such as Isaac's preference over Esau) as well as many accounts of favor upon, and ultimately authority or headship over the firstborn by, the subsequent born (e.g. Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, line of Judah, etc.). It seems tenuous to deduce that sequential birth/creation order determines male leadership/authority in marriage and in the church (while acknowledging women can lead outside of the church).

Those for women leadership also use these same chapters to point out an opposite original precedence: that God created men and women to be equal in value and purpose. From the first account in Chapter 1, God created man (meaning humankind) "in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (v.27) and He blessed and told them both to fill and subdue the earth. The original precedence was that men and women were both equal in image of God, in their receipt of His blessing and His command for them to fill and subdue the earth. Even in the account of Eve's subsequent creation in Genesis 2:18, Aida Spencer argues that the Hebrew word "knegdwo" is used to describe the relationship of the helper as "one in front of him" rather than "fit for him" which at minimum implies equality if not superiority. As result of the Fall that equal relationship was broken and the roles of filling and subduing became increasingly separate for women and men, respectively. However, "Jesus' redemption has also reintroduced the potentiality of mutual concern, interdependence, and responsibility." Just as Christ broke the curse and restored the relationship between humankind and God, He has also broken the curse and restored the originally intended equality between the genders in both filling and subduing.⁶

Old Testament Precedence

There is general consensus that the Old Testament is predominantly filled with accounts of male leaders (e.g. patriarchs, prophets, judges, kings and priests), and few exceptions for women, which puts both camps in awkward positions to argue precedence. Those opposed to women leaders highlight the

⁵ Dan Doriani, *Women and Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003) 53-60.

⁶ Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 17-40.

preponderance of male leaderships but must explain away the accounts of women leaders (e.g. Deborah, Huldah, Esther, etc.) as not real leaders. They define legitimate leadership as permanent and public, under which framework Deborah quasi-leads by privately advising Barak temporarily to battle against Sisera's army (Judg 4); Huldah privately consults and prophesies to Josiah (who is the real leader) (2 Kgs 22 and 2 Chr 34); and Esther is not leading at all but doing as she is told by Mordecai.⁷ A potential danger is that such narrowed definition can put to question both male and female leaders in Scripture. For example which prophet would be considered a leader since he or she did not have ultimate authority to change the directions of their people once kingship was instituted? What length constitutes temporary and permanent leadership? Deborah had been publically judging under the sycamore tree even before Barak approached her, and nothing seems to indicate that she stopped after the battle with Sisera (same goes for Huldah). Xerxes clearly gave Esther the authority, and, with Mordecai, she legislated and executed a plan that saved all her people and defeated their enemies (Esth 8-10).⁸

Those for women leadership must argue that the few exceptional women leaders in the Old Testament show that there is no Old Testament precedence at all. Instead, the overwhelming accounts of men leadership in the Old Testament are the result of the male-dominant cultures of the time.⁹ However, such a pragmatic explanation that the Bible is only reflecting the biases of the time puts into question the inerrancy and full inspiration of the Bible. Leonard Swidler actually argues: "Scripture though inspired was written by humans within the perspective of their particular time, place and culture, thus the Bible has much sexist patriarchal assumptions, structures, stories, sayings, etc. that must be reformed."¹⁰ It is important to consider the culture and history of the relevant times in which particular Scripture was written, but it is dangerous to wholly subjugate the inspired Word to the same.

Jesus' Precedence

One of the main arguments made for exclusively male leadership is that Jesus appointed twelve male apostles. Jesus never hesitated to go against the norms of that time, just as He healed on the Sabbath, hung out with sinners and tax collectors, etc. The fact that He only appointed men apostles and

⁷ Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 23-40.

⁸ James T. Davis, *Redefining the Role of Women in the Church* (Santa Rosa Beach, FL: Christian International Ministries Network, 1997) 47-52.

⁹ R.T. France, *Women in the Church's Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 1995) 73-76.

¹⁰ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1979) 9-11.

no women, was His precedence that only men should lead in church.¹¹ However, it is one thing to say that Jesus set precedence for the apostles to be men, and another to say that His precedence was for church leaders to be only men. Had He wanted to mandate that only men lead, He could have been just as explicit as He was in commanding us to make disciples (Mat 28:16-20) and be His witnesses (Act 1:7-8). Is it possible that too much can be read into His actions instead of just taking them as they are? Christ's choice of twelve male apostles could have been a historical provision of "limited duration" and not permanent values of the kingdom.¹²

Those for women leadership claim that Jesus set precedence for all men and women to prioritize ministry over their then-existing gender roles. Spencer argues that despite the culture that repressed women from learning and even stepping outside their homes, Jesus accepted women as well as men to be His disciples to learn and minister. In Luke 10:38-42, Mary is commended for sitting at the feet of the Rabbi as one of His students over Martha tending to her household duties. He also had a woman be His witness in Samaria, and His women disciples like Mary, Joanna, and Salome, traveled with His team and supported Him out of their own means.¹³ Jesus redefined His own family when He pointed to His disciples as "my mother and brothers" (Matt 12:48-50 and Mark 3:33-35).¹⁴

Apostolic Church Precedence

The accounts of men leading the early churches also outnumber the accounts of women leading. Those against women leadership argue that there is no account of women in legitimate leadership (see discussion under "Original Precedence"), other than private advisory and assistive roles alongside a male leader. Thus, Phoebe is relegated to be a helper even though she is called *διακονας* (deaconess), and Priscilla affirms the women's supportive role by teaching Apollos privately alongside her husband (Acts 18:24-28). Again the point is made that the twelve apostles were men, and Paul assumed that all elders and deacons were to be men when he discussed their qualities in 1 Timothy 3.¹⁵ George Rutler claims that there is no biblical basis for ordained priestesses. For example if Phoebe is mentioned as a deaconess, then Scripture would have specifically mentioned a priestess (*πρεσβυτερος* or *επισκοπος*),

¹¹ Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 41-52; Rutler, *Priest and Priestess*, 55-62.

¹² France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 76-78.

¹³ Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 43-63.

¹⁴ France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 76-78.

¹⁵ Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 23-40.

therefore it is an intentional omission.¹⁶ But similar logic is used to argue for women ordination by Lloyd Patterson when he writes that “early Christian evidence simply does not contain the sort of notion of a ‘priesthood of Christ’ which would make it possible for the subject to arise.”¹⁷

Those for women leadership point out that many women played prominent roles in the early churches. Priscilla, based on her name appearing before her husband’s, took lead in instructing and leading others including Apollos. The fact that Paul was trying to curb the enthusiasm and insensitivity of women in the churches of Corinth and Ephesus shows that women were leading already. In Romans 16, Paul lists his co-workers, including many women like Priscilla, Phoebe the deaconess, and Junia who is “prominent” among the apostles.¹⁸ Even Paul’s references to overseers and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 are not necessarily masculine, since in Greek the plural form of those words would be in the masculine form for both men and women.¹⁹

Paul’s Precedence

Verses from Paul’s letters may at first seem pretty clear and explicit that he did not want women to lead, but they become less certain when we ponder his intended scope, context and duration for his prescriptions. 1 Corinthians in particular seem to give a lot of mixed messages on women leadership. The same letter insists that wife and husband have authority over each other’s body (7:4) while Chapter 5 is filled with “heads” – headships of Christ and men, women to cover and men to uncover their heads, etc., and Paul says in Chapter 14 that women should keep quiet in church and ask their husbands at home if they have any questions (vv. 31-40). Those against women leadership insist that these verses affirm their stance.²⁰ Those for women leadership argue that (1) these verses are either within the context of married couples or general conduct and dress of men and women during worship (not leading); (2) the fact that Paul is prescribing appropriate ways women should pray and prophesy in church means that they were already doing so (as Paul acknowledges in Chapter 11); and (3) the same cultural irrelevance to women covering their heads today should also apply to women keeping silent.²¹ Both sides use Ephesians 5:22-24 regarding wives submitting to their husbands as support for their

¹⁶ Rutler, *Priest and Priestess*, 55-62.

¹⁷ Patterson, “Women in the Early Church,” 33.

¹⁸ France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 78-79; Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 96-120.

¹⁹ Davis, *Redefining the Role of Women in the Church*, 107-110.

²⁰ Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 70-86.

²¹ France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 44-50; Reginald H. Fuller, “Pro and Con: The Ordination of Women in the New Testament,” in *Toward a New Theology of Ordination*, 1-11.

arguments: that hierarchy in marriage also applies in church or it is limited to marriage.

Those opposed to women leadership uses 1 Timothy 2:11-12²² as definitive affirmation that women must not teach or have authority in the church.²³ Those for women leadership see these same verses as Paul's measured encouragement to liberate women from their current society that kept them mostly uneducated, so that they may learn silently and submissively like any male rabbinical students. His personal preference was not allowing women to teach or have authority until they learned and had good understanding of Scripture and doctrines. Paul was advising Timothy regarding the church in Ephesus which was experiencing much controversy and confusion, and the unlearned but vocal women in leadership were contributing to the chaos.²⁴ Paul's main concern here, and in 1 Corinthians, is to restore order in the church (1 Cor 14:33), for which he prescribes many things for men and women. For the sake of order, those opposed to women leaders insist women should remain silent and submissive in the public church arena forever, and those for women leaders argue for culturally current and relevant means toward order in the church for which women, now equally learned and proven, can contribute.

Those in favor of women leadership focus much on Galatians 3:26-29, insisting there should be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female in Christ in any context of the church. For Spencer, these verses show that "we are one in wearing Christ," so just as slaves who were not allowed to learn or teach became equal in liberty and access to all roles in church, so should women.²⁵ Those against women leadership argue that these verses are limited to equality in being baptized in Christ (i.e. membership in church).²⁶

Theological Considerations

There are theological arguments for and against women leadership in churches, including God's image, Christ's image and the Trinity. Most agree that God is not one specific gender,²⁷ but those against women leadership point to the many masculine references to God. "God is masculine in that He

²² "11 Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet."

²³ Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 73-79; Rutler, *Priest and Priestess*, 53.

²⁴ Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 71-95; France, *Women in the Church's Ministry*, 44-50; Davis, *Redefining the Role of Women in the Church*, 73-106.

²⁵ Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 64-71; Fuller, "Pro and Con: The Ordination of Women in the New Testament," in *Toward a New Theology of Ordination*, 7.

²⁶ Doriani, *Women and Ministry*, 139; Rutler, *Priest and Priestess*, 21.

²⁷ Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J. "Ordination of Women? - An Ecumenical Meditation," in *Toward a New Theology of Ordination*, 92; Davis, *Redefining the Role of Women in the Church*, 15-26.

is the 'Father.' God is not some sexless eternal 'It.'" This is a "closer image" argument: that man is closer in image to God who is mostly described in masculine images. Just as the Father is the head of Christ, man is the head of the woman, but neither implies subordination. God has discretion on who He chooses to be priests and it happens to be men.²⁸ Those for women leadership counter that God's image is both male and female, pointing to the feminine images in the Bible such as mother to Israel (Isa 46:3-4); as educator and eagle brooding over her children (Deut 32:10-4); as guardian bear or lioness (Hos 13:8; Isa 31:4); as wisdom (Prov); etc.²⁹

With respect to the image of Christ, there is less debate over His gender. However, those against women leadership again argue that man is "closer image" to Christ because of their common gender. Rutler insists that Christ has specifically ordained priests to stand in His place, as "icons of Christ," to conduct the Eucharist, preach, pronounce absolutions which are "the birthright of the male gender."³⁰ James Griffiss, arguing for women leadership, counters that Jesus was a Jewish man, yet in His sacrifice and resurrection we believe that He included all humanity (Jews, gentiles, men and women). Thus, we should also believe the same when we incorporate human beings into Christ in baptism. "It is therefore theologically necessary to say that Jesus in his perfect and full humanity - in his person as the God-Man - is imaged in both male and female, in both Jew and gentile."³¹

The diversity and oneness in the Trinity is also used to support both sides. Rutler insists, "Just as the persons of the Trinity express divinity in different ways, so are these sexual realities distinct manifestation of humanity while being absolutely one in their humanity, common in both dignity and being." The true perfection of "this system of distinction side by side with free equality is apparent only to the Trinitarian believer."³² Spencer argues, based on Genesis 1:26-27,³³ that the creation of Adam as male and female represents "humanity in essential interrelational unity and diversity," which better reflects the whole image of God and Trinity.³⁴

²⁸ Rutler, *Priest and Priestess*, 20-28 and 65-73.

²⁹ Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 121-123; Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, 21-25.

³⁰ Rutler, *Priest and Priestess*, 77-91.

³¹ James D. Griffiss, "Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: Test Case for Anglican Authority," in *Toward a New Theology of Ordination*, 68.

³² Rutler, *Priest and Priestess*, 18-20.

³³ 26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

³⁴ Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 17-21.

Conclusions

Biblical and theological support can be built to argue precedence for or against women leadership. Interestingly, much of the supporting evidence on both sides is based on the same biblical verses and theological concepts. Unlike explicit biblical commands (e.g. Great Commission), women leadership in church is not explicit, thus, subject to ongoing debate. Perhaps the subject of women leadership in church (also church governance in general) are not necessarily first-tier doctrines such as salvation by grace through faith, inerrancy of Scripture, etc., but more a pragmatic (but important) issue that has room to develop and change, just as church's thoughts on church music developed and changed over time. Van Beek proposes that ordination of women is a discretionary judgment and not a doctrinal matter, driven more by ecumenical concerns with the Catholic, Orthodox and free churches. Even the Catholic prohibition on women ordination is based on tradition and not on theology.³⁵ Perhaps it is more a concern over order in the church. Any substantial changes to a long standing status quo may cause disruption, confusion and disorder. That was the case when the Jerusalem council considered the gentile Christians who could soon outnumber (if not already) the Jews. Council had to decide on the Christian identity, which had been ethnically and customarily Jewish. One way to maintain order as disputes grew was to insist that all must become Jewish to be Christians (e.g. circumcision). Instead, the council decided on a Christian identity that transcended ethnicity and culture for a new order, while being sensitive to then-Jewish customs that were also consistent with Christian faith (Acts 15:1-35; Gal 2:1-10). The council did this, likely knowing that the gentiles could become the majority of the church and its leaders. Could not today's churches also come to accept the shift of church leadership from solely male toward gender diversity? It has already happened in certain denominations (Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc.) and I do not believe that Christ has departed those denominations. There is always fear in change, especially for those who have been in power (men) for a long time. But, the results of keeping up this debate are unnecessary amounts of acrobatics in exegesis and theology just to make the bible and God fit into the opposing views. To qualify every biblical reference to women leaders as non-normative and limited to temporary and discreet support alongside a real male leader just seems like unnecessary and excessive work. Even more concerning is the temptation to second guess the Scripture itself by questioning the accuracy of the more numerous accounts of men leadership: that Scripture is tainted with the gender biases of then societies, and Paul was clearly being chauvinistic, thus

³⁵ van Beek, "Ordination of Women? - An Ecumenical Meditation," in *Toward a New Theology of Ordination*, 93-98.

his letters must be less than inspired).³⁶ Would it not be better to accept what is written in Scripture as is? There are many accounts of male leaders but there are also some accounts of women leaders. God is beyond gender, yet Scripture uses both masculine and feminine images for Him. Jesus was/is male, and He did appoint twelve male apostles. The early churches had lots of male leaders and some female leaders. Like the exceptional accounts of women leaders in Scripture, we currently have women leaders in some of the churches. Those churches still reluctant to this change can wait some more as they observe and see how it works out in the churches that have embraced women leaders.

Underneath all the reasoned and passionate biblical and theological arguments for or against women leadership, I suspect that the real battle is over the potential shift in authority and power within the church, as may have been the case for the Jerusalem council. If that is the case, we should just say so and debate over the wisdom of such redistribution of power and authority for the particular times and the particular communities.

As a final thought, I believe Christ did set “precedence” for leadership. In Luke 22 the disciples argued over who should be the top person, but Jesus their Lord, Master and leader washed their feet and told them, “let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves,” (v. 26). If leading is really more about serving: God, church and world, as opposed to having power and authority, would the arguments on both sides be as adamant and nuanced? As Frederick Borsch puts it, Jesus' authority also came because He came to serve. Authority in church is not like calling down fire from heaven (Luke 9:51-56) but rather to follow Him to the cross.³⁷ Should we not offer to both men and women such wonderful opportunity to bear His image of servitude?

³⁶ Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman*, 352-356.

³⁷ Frederick H. Borsch, “The Authority of the Ministry,” in *Toward a New Theology of Ordination*, 20.

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