

The Role of Women in the Church*

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The cultural background to the epistles

When in Old Delhi once, I visited the golden-domed temple of the Sikhs. Being a woman, I was taken round to the back entrance and then through several rooms, till I reached the upper gallery where the ladies gathered. I sat on the richly carpeted floor and surveyed the scene. Suddenly, as so often in the east, the scriptures became alive! We were high above the main body of the temple. The worship — intoning of the sacred book, and instructions for salvation — being carried on down below was pertinent only to the men. I tried in vain to hear what was going on, but the women were sitting around in groups gossiping, amused at the play of their children, careless of the fact that they were in a place of worship. For them a visit to the temple was merely an opportunity to escape from the monotony of an existence behind the four walls of their homes, where they reign supreme in their own quarters, but where their lives seldom encroach upon those of their men-folk, who do all the work involving contact with the outside world.

Not many months later I attended one of the christian conventions held annually in S. India. Day after day thousands of men and women sat under the large leaf shelter. The men's section of the 'pandal' was quiet and orderly as they listened to the word, taking notes with assiduous care. The women's half was another matter. All the children were there, restless, demanding and noisy, and many of the women were sitting in groups chattering.

The eastern woman has always been sheltered and kept apart from the main-stream of life in the world, and she has not been encouraged to break from the security which such an existence afforded. She would wear a veil at all times (1 Cor.11:2-16). It denoted her recognition of the lordship of her husband and also gave her dignity and protection. Even in these days no man would presume to intrude upon the privacy of a woman shrouded in her 'burqa' or 'pallu' — the

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end of her sari pulled over her head. In orthodox hindu or muslim homes the women are still not allowed to go out freely; they are veiled, and when the men-folk approach, they sidle away quietly into the women's quarters to remain out of sight until called by their master.

A journey in an Indian train can be instructive in these matters. The 'Ladies' Compartment' is completely shut off from the rest of the carriage. No matter how hot or airless, the door is closed and no man is permitted to enter other than a close relative of the ladies inside, who will bring all necessary food and drink to the compartment and even he will remain no longer than is absolutely essential.

In the South Indian language which I speak, in common with other eastern languages, there is no difference between the feminine and neuter gender. A woman is 'a thing'; 'the thing in the kitchen', a thing to be sold for a price called a dowry, valued in terms of animals, land or money. She has no inherent rights; she is the sole property of her husband or, if he dies, of her male relatives including her son.

I have seen a woman, on the death of her husband, being taken outside a village fully shrouded. There she was stripped of her jewellery and her glory, for her head was shaved. From then on she may never again allow her hair to grow or leave her head uncovered. It is to her shame (1 Cor.11:6) till she dies that she has become a widow. Re-marriage is unthinkable; has she not caused the death of her husband? Again, I knew a woman who lived an adulterous life and, refusing to heed reproof, was taken by the elders and had her hair cropped, thus bringing upon herself public dishonour (1 Cor.11:6).

It is still considered in the east either a disgrace or a misfortune for a girl to remain unmarried. An unmarried life is incomprehensible to the eastern mind which cannot conceive a single person living in sexual purity. The unmarried women of earlier days were almost invariably 'devotees' of the gods, temple prostitutes who were usually lavishly adorned with jewels and often immodestly dressed.

In new testament times the Jewish and Greek cultures both decreed that a woman was neither expected nor permitted to learn from the holy scriptures, and the concept of a woman teacher was inconceivable. This attitude held true in India until as recently as the last century, when Pandita Ramabai's father was made outcaste for daring to teach his daughter the sacred hindu vedas.

It was against a background such as this that the apostles wrote to the early churches; and it helps us to understand what the scripture teaches if we appreciate something of the customs which still prevail in the east where christianity has not yet shed its enlightening rays in sufficient degree to dispel the darkness and bondage of heathenism.

The subject of women in the epistles

Basically the problems which confronted the early church were no different from those which confront the church today. How much does contemporary society influence the conduct of the church? To what extent should the liberty of the believer in Christ be tempered by local custom in order to maintain a good witness?

This matter is discussed in 1 Cor.11, where the role of women is considered as part of the whole topic of conduct in the church. Chapter 14, and also 1 Tim.2, touch upon the public ministry of women. Such portions of these chapters which deal with the women's role should not be wrested from their context, but need to be understood as an integral part of a wider subject.

To gain a balanced view of the scriptures they should be interpreted not only against the background of historic cultures, but also in the light of

1. what the bible as a whole says about this subject,
2. Christ's attitude to women,
3. the practice prevailing in the early church.

1. In old testament times women enjoyed the same privileges as men in worship. Many sang in the temple choirs (1 Chron.25:5f; Neh. 7:67). Women also served in the tabernacle and the same word *sābā* is used of their work as that of the Levites (Ex.38:8; 1 Sam.2:22). These may have been wives of Levites or, more probably, widows who had dedicated themselves to the service of the Lord.

- (a) Anna worshipped and gave thanks publicly in the temple (Lk.2:36-38).
- (b) Miriam, who led the women in public praise, is specifically identified as a prophetess (Ex.15:20; cf. Micah 6:4).
- (c) Deborah was not prevented from prophesying by the law and what a graphic song of triumph she composed (Judges 4 and 5)!
- (d) Hannah's inspired prayer is recorded for us in 1 Sam.2.
- (e) Huldah was acknowledged as the outstanding prophetic figure of her day. When King Josiah sent Hilkiah, the priest, and the elders to consult with her, the Lord revealed his will through her (2 Kings 22:8-20). Both Miriam and Huldah were contemporaries of great prophets, viz. Moses and Jeremiah (cf. 2 Kings 22:3 with Jer.1:2), which fact refutes the contention that women received the prophetic gift only in the absence of qualified men.

2. Christ's total attitude toward women showed his unreserved

appreciation of them. This was in contrast to the normal custom of those days dictated as it was by rabbinic standards.

- (a) He recognised women as persons and accepted their gifts, being supported materially by a group of women who accompanied him on his tours assisting in the ministry (Lk.8:1-3; Mk.15:41; Matt.27:55).
- (b) The Sanhedrin taught 'indulge not in conversation with womankind',¹ but Christ broke all such racial, traditional, and sexual barriers with impunity (Jn.4:27).
- (c) He defied Jewish custom also in permitting Mary to 'sit at his feet and learn' in rabbinic tradition — a privilege granted to men only. He commended her for this, and exhorted Martha to choose the better part (Lk.10:42).
- (d) According to the law, both of those caught in the act of adultery should be put to death (Lev.20:10). The Lord, being impartial, exposed the injustice and hypocrisy of man as he forgave the woman (Jn.8:1-11).
- (e) He entrusted women with the most crucial fact of redemptive history; they were to witness to the disciples of his resurrection. This is truly remarkable since women's testimony was not regarded as sufficient to establish a fact legally in those days. No wonder the disciples hesitated to believe (Lk.24:11)!
- (f) In the economy of the East, a sister could be an acute liability, but Christ declared that giving up a sister for his sake constituted a privation that he himself would recompense (Matt.19:29). This was a most unusual precept for a man of his time, but such was the value he put upon women.

3. In the early church it is evident that women took as active a part as the men.

- (a) The Spirit fell equally on men and women (Acts 2:1-4).
- (b) The women prayed with the men (Acts 1:14; 1 Cor11:4f).
- (c) There were women evangelists, co-workers with Paul (Phil.4:2f).
- (d) The Holy Spirit used women as well as men as his prophetic mouthpieces (Acts 21:9).
- (e) Women taught in certain circumstances (Acts 18:26-28; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14f; Titus 2:3-5).
- (f) There were deaconesses in the local churches (Rom.16:1; 1 Tim. 3:11).
- (g) Note the impressive list of women commended for their loyal service in Romans 16.

Thus it is clear that nowhere in scripture is it indicated that women

should be wholly silent. Prayer, praise, and prophesying were permitted by the law and were also customary in the early church.

There were however two opinions held concerning women in the church in ancient times, just as there are today. At one extreme, there was an overlapping of the pagan attitude that a woman was inferior, the property of her husband. This produced an unnatural and improper subjection of women on the part of the men in the church. Many women were content to fill such a role. They were believers, but as women it did not occur to them that they should take seriously the matter of learning all they could about their new-found faith. Religion had always been the prerogative of the men; their place was in the home. At the other extreme, there were those women who were influential in their own spheres, some even owning their own business or properties. They realised that in Christ 'there is neither male or female' (Gal.3:28b) and that as believers they were equal with men in the sight of God. They thus found the restrictions of the heathen society irksome, especially the hampering veil, and they wished to cast it off.

The apostle discusses this particular issue within a more wide-ranging discourse. 1 Cor.11 is a natural sequel to chapter 10. 'Why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples?' (10:29). To this he replies, 'Give no offence to the Jews, or to the Greeks, or to the church of God' (v.32). 'Be ye imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (11:1). Here is the crux of the matter: in all things we should take Christ as our example. But what aspect of Christ's example does the apostle encourage us to follow here?

For the purpose of bringing redemption to mankind, he who was equal with God, voluntarily became subject to the Father (Phil.2:6). He did not act on his own initiative though he could well have done so, but willingly submitted to the authority of the Father (Jn.8:28,42, etc.). Such was the complete oneness and interdependence of the Son with the Father, that Christ declared, 'The Son can do nothing of his own accord' (Jn.5:19). This was the practical submission of an equal for a specific purpose, and it in no way rendered him inferior to, or unequal with, the Father.

This is the pattern for the woman. Equal as she is with the man, she will acknowledge his leadership within the church as being divinely ordained and inter-relate accordingly. This relationship in the days of the apostle was expressed by the wearing of the veil. Thus in keeping with contemporary custom, the apostle says that to wear the veil would avoid offence to both Jewish and Gentile communities. For believing women of those times to have discarded the veil would have created grave misapprehension as to the morals prevailing in the

church, and this had to be avoided at all cost, especially in the licentious city of Corinth.

At the same time, Paul describes the veil in verse 10 as 'authority' upon her head. The western mind finds this concept strange, that the wearing of the veil denotes *not the authority of the man over the woman but rather her own authority and power* within the divinely ordained hierarchy. Ramsay defines the Oriental view: "Without the veil the woman is a thing of naught, whom any one may insult. A woman's authority and dignity vanish with the discarded veil". He suggests that the nearest equivalent we know is the 'authority' which a magistrate wears upon his head vesting him with power.²

The apostle also implies that since the angels veil their faces in the presence of a thrice holy God, it would offend them to see the unbecoming familiarity and lack of reverence in an unveiled woman worshipper.³ As H. L. Ellison comments, "Every time and clime have had their expression of womanly modesty."⁴ It hardly needs to be said however that the modern hat as worn in western countries, almost only at church services, has little or no relation to the eastern veil worn compulsorily at all times, for it carries neither the same significance nor performs the same function.

The apostle next turns his attention to the men. Jewish men had been accustomed to wearing a head covering during worship. Now they are to discard it in recognition of the divine order, that under Christ the head, they are appointed to authority in the church (1 Cor.11:7).

The injunction in 1 Cor.14:34 that women should keep silence in the church must be interpreted in the light of other scriptures and should not be isolated from the other two references in the same chapter to keeping silence in the church (v.28,30). The subject under discussion here is order in the church service. It may be clearly seen from Acts 1:14 and 1 Cor.11:4,5 and 1 Tim.2:9 that women are expected to pray and prophesy in the church meetings; albeit they are to be suitably attired. The silence imposed upon women here may not be taken as cancellation of a permission previously granted. It would be idle for the apostle to prescribe dress when praying if, in fact, public prayer is denied to the ladies.

What then is the silence here? It should be remembered that there were no written new testament scriptures in the days of the apostles, and discussion of the old testament scriptures was an essential part of discovering the truths of their new faith (Acts 17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8f; 20:9 etc.). This was known as authoritative teaching, and much of it took the form of dialogue and debate. While it was conceded that women had the right, in fact the responsibility, to learn, the apostle

declared that they should not intrude into the debate of the teachers. The injunction to silence here is no contradiction of chapter 11. In point of fact, Paul is following the same principle. Once again he says that women, though spiritually equal with men, should cause no offence. They should follow the current practice. In those days girls did not attend public or synagogue schools. If they wished to do so, they learnt at home from their brothers or fathers. In the same way, Paul says, women should learn at home from their husbands. For those of us who live in the east it is easy to imagine the dismay which would be caused if women were to call across from the ladies' half of the congregation to their husbands sitting in the men's section. Such flagrant disregard of reverence in the presence of God would call forth a stern rebuke.

When Paul writes later to Timothy to give him instructions for the Ephesian church he touches upon this subject again (1 Tim.2:8-15). Having stated that the women should be suitably attired when praying, he gives his reason why a woman is not permitted to teach or to take authority in the church. It was when Eve stepped out of her position of dependence upon her husband and acted on her own initiative that she was deceived and sin entered. It was possibly to underline the danger of this in the church that Paul wrote 'yet woman will be saved through bearing children' (2:15). It seems that he was encouraging the christian woman to realise that despite her new status as a person — with an eternal soul to save, of equal value in the sight of God, as much responsible for the use of the life with which God had endowed her as her male counterpart — she should not despise the traditional function of the woman. Child-bearing and child-rearing remain her primary calling, and as an enlightened believer she has a great responsibility to teach and train her children. For the unmarried there is a similar responsibility in the spiritual realm.

God's divine order

It would seem that, were the divine order which God instituted in creation rightly understood and accepted, many of our problems concerning the role of women in the church would cease to exist. Gen.1:27 says so simply, 'so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them'. Similarly Gen.5:1 reads: 'when God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them . . . and named them Man when they were created'. In these simple uncomplicated statements we have the summation of our equality, the

complementary nature and harmony of our humanity. We project the image of God as male and female, since God is male-female in his totality. It is necessary therefore to encompass both the male and the female in order to have a balanced projection of who God is.

In creation, God fully harmonised the sexes; and neither male nor female is complete without the other (1 Cor.11:11f). Thus Adam and Eve reigned together over God's creation as king and queen (Ps.8:4-8). Together they fellowshiped with God, and they equally shared the blessings of God (Gen.1:28). They were equally heirs of the grace of life together (1 Pet.3:7). Within this equality lies the authority-structure given by God. Man was created first, then the woman from the man and for the man. Thus man is the head (1 Cor.11:3). Small wonder is it that when sin entered, this most beautiful of all relationships, meant to display so perfectly the image of the Godhead and reflect the love of Christ for his church (Eph.5:21-33), became the prime target of the enemy.

In Gen.3:16 we see the results of the fall. These are not the words of a harsh God pronouncing an unbearable penalty upon his disobedient children, but those of a God of infinite holy love announcing the inevitable and awful consequences of sin.⁵ Man, God predicted, would take advantage of the weakness of woman, bringing a progressive domination over her until she would be reduced to a chattel, a mere 'thing', which is exactly what has pertained in non-christian religions down the ages.

Christ's work of restoration

When Christ came, as we have been reminded, he restored the dignity of the woman and gave to her, her rightful place in society.

- (a) In Christ once again she is equal with the man (Gal.3:28b).
- (b) In Christ she obtains salvation by faith exactly as the man does.
- (c) In Christ her body becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit even as his.
- (d) She is fed by the word as he is.
- (e) She may be the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit as he also may be.
- (f) She has access to the one common Father in prayer as he has, for she with him is ordained to the priesthood with all the responsibilities and privileges attendant upon such a high calling (1 Pet.2:9).

To limit public prayer to the men alone is to proclaim a doctrine of the priesthood of male believers, and to restrict prayer and prophesying to

women's meetings alone is to presuppose an inequality which does not exist.

Scripture assures us that spiritual equality is God's intention, and this perspective never varies whether stated in the old testament or in the new. Paul in Eph.5:21f says 'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord'. For practical purposes, within the equality which God has created, there must be a head. Thus, man as head, with Christ for his example, will take the initiative, not sparing himself. Woman, taking Christ also as her example, submits and co-operates; and her obedience becomes a joy, as both of them are activated by the love of Christ. Just as Christ is the glory of God, that is, the full expression of God, so the woman is the glory of man; she is a prepared complement to his maleness, and without her he is incomplete (1 Cor.11:7). Each is dependent upon, and is necessary to, the other. Mutual submission as a wider principle within the church is a spiritual commitment for which we are answerable to the Lord, 'for none of us lives to himself'.

The tragedy is that for many generations there has been an imbalance in our churches. As a result women generally have been content to remain inarticulate. Many are incapable of prayer in public and, even more serious, they are not able to communicate the truths of their christian faith to others. And worse, they are not distressed that this is so. This means that a large section of each church has become atrophied, incapable of action, thus seriously hampering the effective witness of the church as a whole.

The steps which should be taken to rectify this position will inevitably vary from place to place and from time to time, but it seems incontrovertible that the women with their homes are the key to the evangelisation of today's unchurched peoples. They need to be given all the loving, gentle encouragement and stimulus that is possible to help them to overcome the inhibitions and fears of the years. The responsibility for this initiative lies with the elders of each local church who, with the deaconesses of their appointment, should make every effort to discover and develop latent gift among the women and thus bring about a total involvement of the church in realistic and effective outreach.

It is certain that if our eyes were open rightly to understand God's order for the church there would be less fear on the part of the men that their position of leadership and authority in the church was being challenged and less apprehension on the part of the women that their activities were being misconstrued. A family is complete and happy when both father and mother work in harmony, each filling his or her own God-appointed role efficiently. So the local church as a spiritual

family will be really effective only when both men and women work side by side at the assignment for which each has been called and endowed.

Postscript (1982)

There is nothing in the paper written in 1974 which I now wish to delete or modify. I wish only to underline all I have written and stress that I am more convinced than ever that the time is now ripe for further consideration and action by elders of local churches.

I feel, however, that a further note is now required on 1 Tim.2:8-15 where it is stated that women are not permitted to teach in the church, but first I should like to note once again that in the new testament days there was no written statement of 'the faith', i.e. apostolic teaching of authoritative christian doctrine. Paul urged Timothy several times to guard the truth which had been entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit (1 Tim.4:13-16; 2 Tim.3:14-17) and instructed him to hand it down to faithful men who would do the same.

The teacher of that day (always a man) was not such as today. He was more like the 'guru' of hindu culture, who not only teaches but gathers around him a group of disciples over whom he asserts authority and who imbibe his teaching and follow his way of life. Such were the Jewish rabbis and teachers of Greek philosophies. In an age when women were not permitted even the privilege of education, a woman teacher certainly was not acceptable to society, for teaching carried with it authority. Paul moreover was considering cultural proprieties. He used the creation story also to point out that *generally* a woman is more easily deceived than a man and that, at a time when false teaching was being propagated as authentic, it was absolutely essential for the purity of 'the faith' to be maintained. Again we find the authority structure coming into view. The man must take the initiative and responsibility in this matter also.

If we realise that Paul's restrictive directions on the teaching role of women were based on the prevailing cultural situation and the fact that the scriptures were still incomplete, then we will readily understand that today's situation is very different. Unfortunately our thinking on this matter is confused because we consider 'teaching' to be merely the speech which comes from the pulpit. In the early christian era, we have noted, such was not the case and today there is no reason to assume that a woman is usurping authority if the elders of her church, realising that she is a competent teacher, agree that she should teach the whole church (men included) in the area of her competence.

The matter of leadership of women is also linked with this and needs to be looked into more carefully. Not only should elders seek out those women with appropriate spiritual gifts and encourage them to use them to the full, but they should also delegate to them authority to exercise the ministries God has given them within the church, supporting them actively. The appointment of lady elders — under the primary authority of male elders — seems to be the ideal.

David Watson says, "The complementary gifts and insights of men and women would enrich the vision of the whole eldership, strengthen their pastoral oversight, stimulate their thinking and give greater balance to their decision-making." However, where there are basic objections to the appointment of a lady elder, certainly a spiritually mature woman could be appointed as elder to the women and children of the church. (Tit.2:3,4) Such a person will surely have the gifts of teaching, wisdom for counselling and knowledge gained from experience, and would certainly have an understanding of the women of the church which elders would not generally possess. Should she not then at least be invited to attend the elders' meetings regularly? Even if not officially appointed to the status of an elder, her function would be the same. To suggest that elders' wives already perform this function is to evade this very important issue and is neither scriptural nor a wise assumption.

The gifts of the Spirit are granted to individuals, not to married couples. Happy indeed is the situation where both husband and wife are endowed with complementary gifts of leadership. How fruitful was the joint ministry of Priscilla and Aquila! But an elder's wife will not *ipso facto* be the possessor of the spiritual gifts which would equip her for spiritual leadership.

It would be wise for the church to know which ladies (married, single, or widows) are endowed with leadership gifts and which are considered by the elders to hold such office. An official appointment would not be out of place; where the ministry of elders is recognised by hands laid on them, these ladies should be similarly recognised.

It is always unwise to base christian practice on corrective passages in the new testament. We are on far safer ground when we base our practices on the positive statements. Thus in the classic statement of Gal.3:28, Paul states that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, *neither male or female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. No-one in our churches is debarred from leadership on the grounds of racial or social discrimination, thank God! As the prejudice of the centuries has been overcome in these matters, it will surely also be overcome in the matter of equality of the sexes in the area of leadership in the church. I would add to what I wrote some time ago

that after the intervening years I discern signs that we are much nearer to realising the original purpose of God which Christ came to restore, viz. the complementary partnership of male and female in all areas of life, including I trust in the leadership of the church. Thus we are brought nearer to the goal when 'we all grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ' (Eph.4:15).

NOTES

1. Louis M. Epstein, *Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism* (1942), pp.107-19.
2. W. M. Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul* (1907), pp.203-5.
3. F. F. Bruce, *An Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul* (1965) p.99 note.
4. H. L. Ellison, *The Household Church* (1963), p.86.
5. Cf. H. L. Ellison, *The Message of the Old Testament* (1969), p.20.
6. David Watson, *I believe in the church* (1978) p.282.