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# The Ordination of Women : why is it so divisive?

GORDON WENHAM

To many people the question of the ordination of women seems a trivial and unimportant one. It is simply a matter of time before the church catches up with modern thinking. Opposition to women priests is just the product of entrenched male prejudice which will gradually melt away once women are given their rightful place in the ordained ministry. This view, I believe, is over simple. It fails to explain the bitterness of the debate and the divisions it has caused in many churches as well as the fact that many women do not wish to see female priests.

The issue of ordaining women to the priesthood is much more profound and is intimately connected with the crisis of morality in our society. It is because this is dimly sensed by many, but rarely clearly articulated, that feelings run so deep and the subject can be so divisive. I shall argue that opposition to the ordination of women is not based merely on the teaching of the New Testament and traditional church practice, but on an understanding of the nature of the ministry and a view of the role of the sexes that runs much deeper and wider than a few Pauline proof texts.

In order to put the biblical teaching on the role of the sexes and the nature of ministry into perspective, I shall begin by outlining the role of women in worship in the Bible as it has been clarified by some recent studies. Then Paul's teaching on the silence of women in church will be examined. Was this a prohibition on any woman speaking in worship, or only a ban on their teaching men? Did he consider this ban an accommodation to first-century culture or a permanent rule? An answer to this question brings into focus the biblical view of the role of the sexes. I shall argue that, according to Paul, female leadership in the church is not only incompatible with the principle that women should submit to men, but ruled out by his view of the minister's role in the church. Finally, I shall consider how far biblical views of the relationship between men and women are tenable in the light of recent anthropological and medical research.

## **The ministries open to women in the Bible**

### **1) Old Testament times**

The position of women under the old covenant is well surveyed by C. J. Vos, *Women in Old Testament Worship* (Judels and Brinkman : Delft 1968). Women were allowed to take a full part in Old Testament worship. They could pray, presumably aloud, make vows, offer sacrifices, sing and dance. At least six prophetesses are mentioned in the Old Testament, including Miriam, Deborah and Huldah. Joel 2:28 looks forward to a day when 'your sons and *your daughters* shall prophesy'. Exodus 38:8 and 1 Samuel 2:22 mention women who served in the tabernacle. In what their service consisted is uncertain: among the less improbable suggestions are that they were cleaners, or holy women who devoted themselves to prayer and fasting (cf. Anna in Luke 2:37).

What women could not do in the Old Testament was serve as priests, in any of the three orders of high priest, priests and Levites. In other words there were no women employed in the official ministry of the Old Testament church. Prophets and prophetesses were essentially free-lance. Priests could also be prophets, but prophets could not become priests. That depended on belonging to the right tribe and the right sex.

Priests had two principal functions in the Old Testament: to offer sacrifice and to be the authoritative teachers. It was their job to interpret and apply the law, so that the laity did not make mistakes and incur God's wrath (Lev.10:11, 'You are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken'). In later times Levites also went about teaching and explaining the law. Thus the priest had more intrinsic authority than the prophet (see Amos 7). This is not to say that priests were always right and prophets wrong. Much of the Old Testament is taken up with prophetic criticism of priests. But the prophet-priest tension must not be overplayed. Moses, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all belonged to the priestly tribe.

Finally, it may be noted that Israel differed from the surrounding nations in not admitting women to the paid ministry. Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians all gave women formal roles in the cult: high-priestesses, nuns and sacred prostitutes are known.

### **2) The New Testament picture**

In the Gospels, women play a very important part in the story. Pride of place belongs to Elizabeth and Mary. There were also the women who ministered to Jesus out of their substance. Women accompanied him to the cross, watched his burial, and were the first witnesses of his resurrection. Jesus seems to have been a regular visitor at the house of Mary and Martha. Luke mentions Anna who was a widow and a prophetess, but none of the apostles or the seventy, as far as we know, was a woman.

The contribution of women to the life of the early church is fully recorded in Acts. There was Tabitha, 'full of good works and charity'; Mary, in whose house the Jerusalem church used to meet; Lydia, Paul's host at Philippi; Priscilla, Aquila's wife; and, most interesting of all, the four daughters of Philip the evangelist, who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9). Evidently women fully participated in the life and witness of the church, but not in its leadership.

This picture is clarified and confirmed by Paul's epistles, though certain points in them are a little difficult to interpret. At Corinth women prayed and prophesied (1 Cor.11:5). Whether Paul thought they should have prayed and prophesied is disputed and will be discussed further below. There were official orders of ministry open to women, namely deaconesses and widows (Rom.16:1; 1 Tim.3:11; 5:9ff). However, there is no mention of women serving as elders/bishops. Indeed it seems expressly excluded by 1 Timothy 2:12, 'I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent.' This is admitted even by such an ardent advocate of the ordination of women as J. M. Ford.<sup>1</sup>

How does early Christian practice compare with other religions of classical antiquity? In Judaism, women were sometimes given honorific titles such as 'mother of the synagogue'. One text suggests they could read the law in the synagogue, but there is no suggestion that they could be authoritative teachers. Greek and Roman religions had priestesses and prophetesses. Some heretical Christian sects did ordain women in the first few centuries, but this was never permitted in the Catholic Church.

### **Paul's teaching about the ministry of women**

Thus far we have simply reviewed the practice of the early church as it is known from the New Testament. Now the New Testament doctrine of the ministry and its exercise by women must be investigated. The two key questions in the exegetical debate are: a) Did Paul want women to maintain total silence in church? b) Were his rules intended to be permanently binding or a temporary accommodation to his times?

First, a verse that is often supposed to contradict his remarks in Corinthians and 1 Timothy needs discussion: 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Gal.3:27f) The context of verse 28 shows that Paul is dealing with eligibility for baptism, not with ministry. When it comes to salvation, the great divisions in humanity are unimportant. Paul is not talking about the roles of the sexes here. Therefore this passage is quite irrelevant to our discussion, and in no way contradicts what he has to say in 1 Corinthians or 1 Timothy.

Were women allowed to participate vocally in public worship? 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 appear to exclude it: 'The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law 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.' Yet it is obvious from 1 Corinthians 11:5 that women were prophesying and praying aloud in church. Therefore the most natural reading of 14:34 is that Paul was concerned to stop it.

This is the solution favoured by R. T. Beckwith and G. G. Blum in *Why not? Priesthood and the Ministry of Women* (Marcham Manor Press: 1976). Paul says the women are not to speak, not even to ask questions. The word used for speaking, *lalein*, in v34 has been used earlier in the chapter especially of speaking in tongues and also of prophesying. And it would most naturally cover all kinds of vocal expression mentioned in this chapter.

However, there is a second possibility espoused by G. W. Knight in *The NT Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Baker: 1977) and the recent Vatican statement.<sup>2</sup> This holds that women were allowed to pray or prophesy in church, but not to teach men. This presupposes a distinction between prophecy and authoritative teaching (speaking). 'The apostle regards praying and prophesying on the one hand and speaking which involves teaching (cf. again 1 Cor.14:34 and 1 Tim.2:12) on the other hand as distinguishable and different activities. Praying publicly in the midst of others does not imply or involve any authority or headship over others. Likewise prophesying, an activity in which the one prophesying is essentially a passive instrument through which God communicates, does not necessarily imply or involve authority or headship over others.'<sup>3</sup>

I find this solution attractive because 1 Corinthians 12:29f distinguishes prophecy from teaching. It also brings Corinthian practice into line with that of the Caesarean church which Philip's prophetic daughters attended, and it fits in with the existence of Old Testament prophetesses.

There is, however, a third possibility which cannot be ruled out: in the early church women were allowed to prophesy but only outside church services. But whichever solution is preferred, it is clear that at the least Paul did not want women to occupy the position of authoritative teachers in the church. They had to keep silence and submit to men. If they were allowed to prophesy, that was because prophets did not enjoy the same authority as the ordained elders/bishops.

Is Paul's injunction to silence meant for all time or was it only culturally conditioned for his particular society? This question is dealt with fully by Knight and I will briefly summarize his arguments. In both 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, Paul grounds his injunctions to

silence on the subordination of men to women. This idea of female subordination is of course not uniquely Pauline: cf. Peter, 'Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands' (1 Peter 3:1). Thus Paul's refusal to allow women to lead men in church is just one example of the more general biblical principle that women should submit to men and not vice versa.

Now the man-woman relationship is not the only human relationship mentioned in the New Testament where one party is told to submit to another. Children must obey parents; slaves obey their masters; citizens obey their emperor. If one accepts that wives must obey their husbands, does it follow that slavery can still be tolerated, or that an empire is the best form of government? Or to go to the other extreme, if one supports women's lib in marriage, why not children's lib in families?

The solution to these dilemmas lies in the reasons offered by the apostles for the different submissions. Submission to the emperor is cited by Peter simply as an example of submitting to every human institution. It is not an argument in favour of empire instead of democracy. Paul's and Peter's advice to slaves is grounded in the principle of staying put and making the most of your present situation. There is no suggestion that slavery is an eternal institution. But when we come to wives submitting to husbands, we meet a whole battery of theological reasons that are not culturally conditioned.

This is the way God created man:

'Adam was formed first, then Eve' (1 Tim. 2:13).

This relationship symbolizes God's relation with his people:

'As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.' (Eph. 5:24)

The fall demonstrates that women should not teach men:

'Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.' (1 Tim. 2:14)

But:

'Holy women who hoped in God . . . were submissive to their husbands' (1 Pet. 3:5).

I think it would be easier to argue that children obeying their parents is culturally conditioned, than wives obeying husbands. Beside these texts indicating that the apostles did not regard the submission of women to men as an accommodation to the ideals of their times, must also be set recent anthropological and biological discoveries which appear to show that men inevitably tend to dominate. Male dominance is built into the human constitution. God created us this way.

### **The minister as paradigm**

But is the question of male ministry merely the particular expression of male dominance or is there something more to it than this? I

suggest there is. Both the priests of the Old Testament and the ministers of the New Testament should be paradigm figures, ideals, norms, models which the ordinary Christian may look at and imitate. The priests of the Old Testament symbolized in the perfection of their physique, the perfection and holiness of God.

Say to Aaron, None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles; no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God (Leviticus 21:17-21).

'In other words he must be perfect as a man, if he is to be a priest.'<sup>4</sup>

If physical blemishes disqualify a man from holding priestly office, moral failings are even more serious in priests, and sin can result in their sudden death. Their wives and children must be of good repute as well (Lev.10:1-3; 21:7-15).

It is clear from the New Testament that the same picture of ministry is put forward. Paul tells the Corinthians to imitate him as he does Christ. He shares in Christ's sufferings. Luke portrays Paul as going up to meet his fate in Jerusalem, just as his Lord went there before. The apostles and their successors are thus supposed to re-incarnate the character of God, to act before the world as God acts.

Just as the Old Testament priests had to exemplify God's holiness, the bishops/elders should embody the character of God in their lives and their families: 'A bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, hospitable, an apt teacher . . . He must manage his own household well' (1 Tim. 3:2-4).

There is then an obvious continuity between the Old Testament requirements for priesthood and the New Testament requirements for ministry. Both dispensations require the ministers to be paradigms, embodying the holiness and perfection of God in their everyday relationships. The New Testament clearly regards the sacrificial role of the Old Testament priests as made obsolete by Jesus' death on the cross (Hebrews 7f). But it equally clearly views the elders/bishops as the authoritative teachers of the church, as the priests were in Israel. Both Old Testament priests and New Testament bishops must demonstrate in their lives the character of God.

When this theology of priesthood is combined with the biblical view of the role of the sexes, the theological impossibility of female leadership in the church becomes evident. Ministers represent the ideal, the normal, because they represent God. But the norm of relations between the sexes is that the man loves his wife, and his wife obeys him. If women lead men, this is abnormal. It upsets the God-given pattern of society. Whatever is the case outside the church, the

church is expected to live according to God's ideal. If this is so of the ordinary layman, how much more in the ministry.

Genesis 2-3 sets out the divine patterns very clearly.<sup>5</sup> Man should obey God, woman obey man, and animals obey men and women. When this order is reversed, everything is blighted. Eve listened to the serpent instead of Adam; Adam listened to Eve instead of God.

That women should obey men is only half of what Scripture has to say about marriage. Throughout the Bible the relations between God and his people are compared to those between man and wife. Thus Israel was expected to obey the Lord, and the church is expected to obey Christ. But the other half of the picture is that every husband is expected to love his wife, as God loved Israel, and 'as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her'. Christ died to save his people from death; Christian husbands should give their all for their wives. There should be no place for male chauvinism when Christians assert that the man should lead in marriage.

Every Christian marriage should incarnate the relationship that exists between Christ and the church: husbands in the way they love their wives should demonstrate how God loves his church; wives in their love for their husbands should show how the church loves and obeys Christ. Every Christian home should be thus a living example to the world of divine realities. But if this should be true of the ordinary believer's home, how much more so of the church leader's home. This is why St Paul places so much emphasis on the character of the would-be bishop's family. There, above all, must divine realities be embodied.

But once admit that the husband should lead his family, how can this role be reversed when it comes to the church? If the church is to be true to the divine realities symbolized in marriage, married women cannot be leaders of the church without destroying that symbolism. But could unmarried women be appointed to leadership roles in the church and leave the symbolism intact? I think not. In all societies unmarried women are abnormal in the sense that they are untypical; and where they aspire to leadership, they are often unfeminine as well. But a biblical ministry must reflect and embody the divine ideals for man. To give a woman teaching authority over men in the church would inevitably upset the created order.

### **Biblical theology and modern theory**

Finally, how does this biblical picture of the leadership role of men face the challenge presented by the feminist movement? Is male dominance merely the result of cultural conditioning, as is often claimed?

The answer to this question is a categorical No. Steven Goldberg in *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (Temple Smith: London 1977) ex-

pertly and conveniently assembles the relevant anthropological and biological data, and I shall summarize them as simply as possible. First, all societies show patriarchy: that is, most of the top jobs in every society are held by men. By top jobs are meant the most influential political, business and religious positions. Second, all societies show male dominance: that is, in male-female encounters both men and women recognize that ultimate authority resides in the male. The man leads. Third, all societies show male attainment: that is, men's jobs are always regarded as of higher status than women's jobs.

Patriarchy, male dominance and male attainment characterize all known societies, but male dominance is fundamental; patriarchy and male attainment represent other expressions of it.

Recent medical discoveries suggest that the cause of the male dominance lies in differences between the male and female hormonal and nervous systems. In their mothers' wombs, boy babies produce the male hormone testosterone. This affects the development of their central nervous system, so that even in childhood boys exhibit a greater dominance tendency, more drive, more aggression than girls. This drive to dominance is increased after puberty when the male hormone level rises in men.

The combination of differences in the hormone levels and nervous systems makes men on *average* more pushy, more persistent, more dominant than women. Because they have the greater drive, men tend to be more successful in getting to the top of society; whatever jobs carry the most prestige will attract men more and they will tend to get them more often than women.

It is important to note that the difference in drive between men and women is an average, not an absolute one. Just as men on average are taller than women, so men on average have a greater dominance tendency. There are some females who are more dominating than some men. But the most driving females never have as much drive as the most dominant men.

What are the implications of Goldberg's work for the theologian? The evidence he cites substantiates the biblical view that God created men and women different and gave men the natural ability to lead. When the Bible tells wives to submit to husbands, or women to be silent in church, it is telling them to be themselves, to be true to their God-given nature and not rebel against it by asserting themselves over men.

A second point made by Goldberg is also very important. Traditional societies have recognized that men and women differ, and have different roles to play. They have therefore encouraged women to think highly of the jobs that only women can do well; particularly motherhood, and jobs involving support and sympathy e.g. nursing and so on. These are women's great contribution to society. But the

feminist would encourage women to look on men's tasks as the only really worthwhile jobs for women to pursue. Women ought to want to be prime ministers, business tycoons, professors or even priests. To be a wife or mother is too lowly a job for an aspiring young woman today. Anyone can bring up children. Mothers must get back to work as soon as possible. Put crudely, this is the message of women's lib. Thus, indirectly, the feminist movement undermines the family and deprives children of true maternal support in their formative years. Sometimes the attack on the family by feminist groups is more explicit, for they are often vociferous in their support of more liberal laws on divorce and abortion. But it is ironic that the feminist movement which promises a more satisfying life for women is doomed to lead to greater frustration of women. Most of those women who choose to enter the male rat race will find they lack the drive necessary to compete successfully.

I wish these gloomy predictions were merely the reflection of male resentment at the success of feminism. But as O. R. Johnston<sup>6</sup> has pointed out, many of the evils that could be predicted from the defeminization of women and the downgrading of maternal roles are already with us. Though the British Government has only recently passed legislation outlawing sexual discrimination, and the churches are still undecided about ordaining women, the feminist movement has existed for over a century. This is the age when women have tried to become like men. This denial on the intellectual level of the unique gifts and attributes of the female sex has provoked a reaction on the emotional and physical level that has resulted in more male exploitation of women than ever before: in pornography, divorce, rape and other crimes against women. In earlier ages the weaker sex had to be protected. Nowadays, being equal with men, they can fend for themselves.

It is against this broad theological and sociological background that the opposition to the ordination of women may be understood. There are certainly those who oppose the ordination of women to leadership roles in the church on the grounds that it is incompatible with Scripture or Christian tradition. Though women could participate fully in Old and New Testament worship, and may have been allowed to pray and prophesy in charismatic churches, they were never ordained to be elders or bishops, which would have involved them leading and teaching men. But there are many who dislike the ordination of women, though they are not really concerned that it conflicts with Scripture or tradition. Instinctively they know that men lead women and not vice versa, and they feel that the ministers ought to be model Christians. Those of a catholic outlook find it wrong to think of a woman presiding at the eucharist. This is partly because it is in this act that the priest more obviously symbolizes Christ than at any other time in his ministry, and it therefore seems right that the president

should be male. But, more fundamentally still, it is at meals that in ordinary households the husband's headship comes to expression; therefore it would be wrong to have a woman administering a sacrament which takes the form of a meal. Married women and mothers tend to dislike the idea of women priests because, especially against the background of feminist ideas, it makes them feel second-class women doing less than the best for God. Previous generations of women looked on Mary, the mother of our Lord, and the women who ministered to him, as their example and inspiration. But when the church ordains women to the priesthood they see their God-given instincts of submissiveness and motherhood implicitly criticized by the church's setting up a quite different ideal of womanhood; one that owes more to the feminist movement than to Scripture, tradition or nature.

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## NOTES

- 1 J. M. Ford, 'Biblical Material Relevant to the Ordination of Women', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10 (1973) pp 669-94.
- 2 Published in *The Tablet* 231 (1977), and *The Furrow* 28 (1977) pp 173-85.
- 3 G. W. Knight, *The NT Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Baker : 1977) p 46.
- 4 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge : 1966) p 51.
- 5 See J. T. Walsh, 'Genesis 2:4-3:24' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977) pp 161-77.
- 6 O. R. Johnston in *Why Not? Priesthood and the Ministry of Women*, ed. M. Bruce and G. E. Duffield (Marcham Manor Press : 1978) pp 132ff.