

## Women's Work in the Church

By Mark Moore

### I. Areas of Service:

1. It was a woman who first identified and announced the person of Jesus (Luke 1:39-55).
2. The women were the first to witness the resurrection of Jesus. They were commissioned to tell the Apostles (Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-9; John 20:1, 2).
3. Mary held a prayer meeting in her house, and Rhoda, a maid, kept the door and informed the Christians of Peter's arrival (Acts 12:12-16).
4. Lydia was a leader in the founding of the church at Philippi. Because of her conversion, her whole house was baptized (Acts 16:11-15).
5. Priscilla and Aquilla worked with Paul both at Corinth and at Ephesus. Priscilla is generally mentioned first of the two. Both partners of this team went to Apollos to teach him correctly about baptism (Acts 18:18-28). They hosted a church in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19).
6. Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8-10). In the early church this was not merely a role but a position or a category of ministry.
7. Phoebe was a "deaconess" or "minister" (Romans 16:1-2).
8. "Mary worked hard among you" (Romans 16:16).
9. Women were expected to pray and prophesy in the assembly under the right conditions (1 Corinthians 11:5-16).
10. Euodia and Syntyche "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel," says Paul, and calls them "fellow workers" (Philippians 4:2, 3).
11. Nympha had a church in her home (Colossians 4:15). As did a number of the women mentioned in Romans 16:1-15. Of the 29 names, 9 are female; of the 9 specially commended, 6 are women.
12. Women are included the leadership instructions of 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (cf. v. 11). These are either wives of elders or servants along the lines of deacons.
13. Women who had served the church well could be eligible for support (1 Timothy 5:4-10).
14. Women were to rule their households well (1 Timothy 5:14; cf. Proverbs 31:10-31), in submission to their husbands (Ephesians 5:21-33).
15. Older women are instructed to teach younger women how to live a godly and exemplary life (Titus 2:3-5).
16. In the early centuries, not all Christians were tortured. Generally it was only the church leaders who were persecuted. Given the number of women martyrs, we can ascertain that they held considerable positions of influence.

### II. Areas of Liberation:

1. Women were allowed to serve, follow, and financially support Jesus during his ministry (Luke 8:1-3) which was socially explosive. They were even allowed to sit as his students, a thing unheard of (Lk 10:38-42).
2. Women were granted equal access to God's grace (Galatians 3:28). No longer was their salvation dependent on their husbands (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:18; 5:8, 14; 8:3). This is specifically about women's access to God. This does not eradicate differences in roles or offices in the church.
3. There have always been examples of exceptional women, called by God to fulfill roles

traditionally limited to men, especially when men have abdicated their responsibilities (cf. Deborah, Judges 4-5).

### III. Area of Limitation:

1. A woman is not to teach or exercise authority over a man (especially referring to her own husband), Ephesians 5:21-24; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:34-38; 1 Timothy 2:8-15.
2. This was not cultural. This is based on the nature of men and women and God's ordained hierarchy (1 Corinthians 11:7-9; 14:34) and the fact that woman was the first to sin (1 Tim 2:14).
3. Teaching was more than imparting information. It included a dominance of one over another (cf. Matthew 10:24).
4. The major thrust of this teaching is with wives and husbands, not any woman with any man. The Greek language did not have a separate word for "wife". It was assumed that any full-grown woman would be a wife.
5. Silence in the church is not absolute. It is in the context of taking an authoritative position in teaching, especially through tongues and prophecy.
6. **CONCLUSIONS:** The limitation of women in the service of the church appears to be along the following lines:
  - a. Authoritative teaching role in corporate worship (1 Corinthians 14:34-36).
  - b. Spiritual leader or teacher in their home (1 Timothy 2:8-15).
  - c. Subversion of God's hierarchy of authority, (i.e. God/Christ/Man/Woman/Children), by acting authoritatively or presumptuously (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:21-24)

### Summary

(1) Given the list of women's roles in the N.T. (see attached sheet) it is not reasonable to think Paul was asking women to be absolutely silent in church (after all, how then could they pray and prophesy [1 Cor 11]).

(2) Most of the discussion about women's roles in relation to men, in my estimation, is specifically about husbands and wives. The context of most passages makes this clear. Thus women are not to submit to all men, nor are they forbidden to teach any man (otherwise Priscilla was out of line in Acts 18 with Apollos). Rather, women are not to be the primary teachers of their husbands.

(3) We are in a global war with the Evil one. If I'm to err, I would rather err on liberating women to join the fray than tying up over half of our soldiers. I am not a feminist, nor is it my intention to "set women" free. My goal as a preacher is to proclaim our unmitigated bondage to Jesus. Nevertheless, we need to ask first, "What is the Holy Spirit calling me to do?" not, "What is my gender role." I find throughout the bible notable exceptions to women's traditional roles. I have no problem with the Spirit guiding a woman in ways that are unique and even extraordinary.

Helpful books on the subject:

- Jack Cottrell, *Feminism and the Bible*, College Press, 1992. Ultra right-wing, conservative view, updated in: **Headship, Submission & The Bible: Gender Roles in the Home, 2008.**
- Craig Blomberg & James R. Beck, *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Zondervan, 2001. (Balanced view). Updated by a less notable scholar in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 2005.

- ***In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins***, by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994) This is a classic feminist text and may be all you need to read from a liberationist perspective to get a handle on the classic feminist hermeneutic (or one strand thereof).
- ***Women in the Earliest Churches***, by Ben III Witherington (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Witherington is a good Methodist scholar. Though more to the left than what you may be comfortable with, his historical research is superlative in generally conservative. He is a key player in gospels research.