

Discovering what God wants: women's roles in the church

George Wieland

What may women do (and not do) in the church and its ministry?

This is part of a bigger question: what does God want for his church in its mission of making the wisdom of God and the wonder of his salvation visible in the world (Eph 3:8-10)?

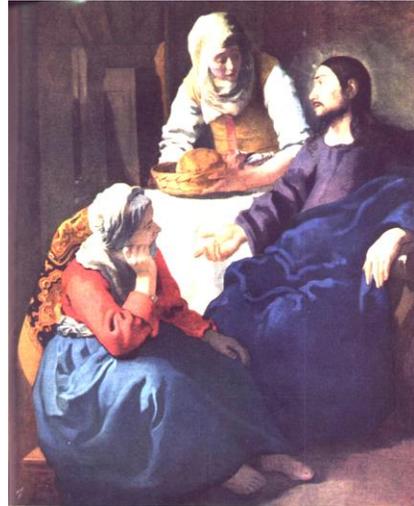
To discover what pleases God we turn to the Bible. But when one side produces one text and another group points to a different text, what do we do? How do we actually "think Biblically" about something?

Consider what the Bible is. It tells the story of God in relationship with this world, records what God has said to various people on many different occasions, gives witness to the living revelation of God in Jesus, describes the experiences of the first followers of Jesus sent out by him into the world empowered by his Spirit, provides explanations of profound truths and real-life examples of God's people struggling to respond faithfully to challenges that confront them as servants of God in a world often resistant to him.

So in the Bible we have an immensely rich, multi-faceted revelation of God, the world, salvation, and the place of the church in God's purpose. To receive its richness every faculty needs to be engaged – feeling, thinking, doing – praying that as the Holy Spirit inspires and illumines and energises we know God more deeply and become more like Jesus.

To be truly Biblical we have to take the whole Bible into account in these various modes of revelation. Among other things we can:

- build up a PICTURE of Jesus and his followers in the NT
- recognize PRINCIPLES that bear on issues we are facing
- examine PARTICULAR TEXTS in the light of that big picture and those principles
- accept the possibility of PROGRESSION in understanding



So let's do some of that in relation to this question of women and roles in the church.

1. Build the PICTURE

a. The Gospels - record of Jesus' life and ministry

Question How did Jesus regard and treat women, and what sorts of roles did he encourage them to fulfil?

Observation Jesus gave much fuller scope to women to learn, to serve, to witness, than was normal - even decent - in his culture (e.g. the Samaritan woman brought her whole community to Jesus, John 4:28-30; Jesus affirmed Mary in her choice to sit and learn with the male disciples, Luke 10:38-42; Jesus entrusted women with the first proclamation of the resurrection, Matt 28:7-8).

Conclusion Women found that Jesus valued them more highly and gave them greater opportunity and responsibility than they were allowed in society in general.

Challenge If we as Christians and churches are to show the world what Jesus is like, how do we do this in respect to valuing women?

b. The early church - first generations of followers and believers

Question How did their experience of the risen Jesus work out in their lives?

Observation Looked at through the culture of the first century Mediterranean world, the prominence and roles given to women is astonishing.

- The mission of the church starts in Acts 2 at Pentecost with all, men and women, anointed with the Spirit and participating in speaking about the great things God had done. All were part of God's plan for declaring the good news to the world.
- Various women come to the fore as the story unfolds through Acts (e.g. Lydia, first to believe in Philippi, whose home became the place of meeting for the new church, Acts 16:13-15, 40; Priscilla, Paul's colleague in church planting, helped teach Apollos, Acts 18:2, 18, 26).
- Paul's letters also show that many of his key co-workers were women (see especially Rom 16:1-16, mentioning the deacon Phoebe, Junia, "prominent among the apostles," and several others).

Conclusion As in the ministry of Jesus, so too in the early church and its mission, women were surprisingly (for the time) prominent in all sorts of roles.

Challenge When people look at the church today, are they surprised, as people in Paul's day would have been, at how significant women are in its ministry? Or would they get quite the opposite impression?

2. Identify PRINCIPLES

Question What principles do we find in the Bible that have a bearing on the issue we are thinking about?

Observation Among others the following principles have implications for women's participation in various roles in the church

- A SPIRIT-FILLED WITNESSING PEOPLE (Acts 2) - men and women together
- ALL ONE IN CHRIST JESUS (Gal 3:28) - and expressing that reality in practical ways

- The BODY OF CHRIST (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12) – these passages have a lot to say about ministry but there is nothing to distinguish between men, women, different races, different social groups - ministry is on the basis of God's gift and call.
- ONE HEAD of this body - who is Christ. No grounds for any woman - or any man - being the "head of a church" - Christ is the head, and all of us are members of the one body, depending on and in partnership with each other and led by Christ.

Conclusion The church is built on principles of the new creation in which all are one in Christ and every believer, male or female, is a member of Christ's body, given gifts and called to serve as he chooses.

Challenge Why close down God's options? It's up to him whom he gifts in different ways and what ways of serving he calls us to. Are our churches communities where God's gifts to and call on all his people (men + women, young + old, different ethnicities, social categories, etc.) are gladly affirmed and scope is given for them to serve God?

3. Examine PARTICULAR TEXTS

Question If the movement in the ministry of Jesus and the life of the early church is towards fuller participation of women, why does Paul say "I don't allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man" (1 Tim 2:12)?

Observation Is there a particular situation that required such a response? Yes.

- Problems in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3-7; 4:1-3; 5:13-16; 2 Tim 3:6-7), especially concerning false teachers who were deceiving women and leading them away from the faith. Women were not educated, so especially vulnerable to deception.
- Paul's solution: *Let a woman learn!* (1 Tim 2:11) – a radical command in a culture where many thought women should not be educated. Principle: Don't teach when you haven't learned! (Could just as well apply to men!)
- *I do not permit* - present tense - "at this present time" – in specific situation.
- *woman . . . man* - same words in Greek for woman - man as for wife - husband. Is Paul talking about all women and all men, or of the wife/husband relationship (as in Corinth)?
- *have authority over* - this is a very forced translation of the original Greek term, which means more like "domineer" or "grab by force". Paul is not talking about authority structures in the church - he is talking about problems in Ephesus with women, influenced by false teachers, pushing into teaching roles they were not ready for.
- Why talk about *Adam* and *Eve* and the order of creation? Paul was answering aspects of the false teaching, and urging women to have humility, but not declaring that women are intrinsically incapable of teaching.

Conclusion This text has come down in our English translations as a very extreme prohibition. Read in Greek it is much milder. But there is certainly a

restriction - a response to a specific and temporary problem for the sake of witness to the truth and the health of the church.

Challenge In our different situations, what restrictions on our freedom in Christ might we have to accept for the good of the church and the gospel? What restrictions are not necessary?

4. Accept PROGRESSION IN UNDERSTANDING

Question For some of us, it seems that we're being asked to change what has been our practice and our understanding for a long time. Shouldn't that make us suspicious?

Observation The first Christians had to change their minds about many things, as they found themselves in new contexts and discovered the implications of Jesus' life and teaching for those contexts. Peter thought he had good Biblical reasons for not going into a gentile home, but the experience of seeing God at work by his Spirit in people whom he had not expected shocked him into recognizing that the gospel had wider scope than he had realized (Cornelius, Acts 10:44-47; 11:15-18). Barnabas was sent to check up on worrying goings-on in Antioch where ethnic boundaries were being crossed, but he *saw the grace of God, and was glad* (Acts 11:23). In each case their picture of what God was doing was enlarged, and their practice developed accordingly.

Conclusion Our changing contexts raise new questions and allow us to discover fresh or fuller implications of God's revelation. Sometimes as God leads us on in our walk with him, the recognition of God's hand at work comes before our understanding of how it fits with what we thought we knew.

Challenge Do we see God at work in and through the ministry of women, even in ways that some of our churches have not traditionally allowed? Can we, like Barnabas, "see the grace of God" and adjust our thinking to recognize unexpected ways that God works in us and others?

Summary

- In the PICTURE of Jesus and his followers in the NT we see a counter-cultural valuing of women and an acceptance of women's contributions in ministry and mission.
- Relevant PRINCIPLES include a new creation reality in Christ in which all share in ministry according to their gifting by the Holy Spirit.
- PARTICULAR TEXTS that limit the participation of women in the church represent responses to particular contextual issues guided by concerns for effectiveness in mission and the health of the church.
- The life of faith, for churches as for individual followers of Jesus, includes PROGRESSION in understanding as new mission and ministry situations and experiences challenge and grow our understanding of what God is doing.