

Report of the Committee to Study the Question Submitted By the Session of New Hope Church

Note: I was the principal author of this Presbytery committee report on a question posed to the body.

The question submitted by the session was this: "Is it Biblically permissible for a woman to teach men and women in an Adult Sunday School Class if she is submitted to the session?" We shall reflect on four matters pertaining to this question.

1. General and Special Teaching Offices

Reformed theology has often distinguished between the *special* teaching office, which consists of the ordained elders, and the *general* teaching office, which includes all believers. The special office has distinct qualifications: an extraordinary spiritual maturity together with unusual, Spirit-given ability to teach. The church recognizes these qualities through the laying on of hands. Those in the special teaching office are divinely appointed to rule in the church under Christ, and God calls his people to hear and obey these teachers (Heb. 13:7, 17).

In addition to this special office, however, there is also the *general* office. Every believer, not just the officers, has a God-given ability to understand the truths of Christ (I Cor. 2:6-16, I John 2:20f, 27). And every believer, insofar as he or she has the ability to communicate, can and should communicate those truths to others. In Col. 3:16, Paul exhorts the people to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another." This teaching and admonishing, certainly, is done by all the members of the church, not only by the officers. Compare also I Cor. 14:26.

2. Women and the Teaching Offices

Your committee unanimously holds that scripture excludes women from the *special* teaching office. Scripture plainly teaches this limitation in I Cor. 14:33-35 and in I Tim. 2:11-15. But scripture says with equal plainness that women are not excluded from the *general* teaching office. The passages mentioned above have a universal reference within the church. All believers, male and female (allowing as we must for differences in physical and mental ability) can and may teach one another.

Scripture specifically endorses women teaching children (II Tim. 1:5) and it urges that older women be trained to teach younger women (Tit. 2:3-5). Further, it is evident that in some biblical contexts women taught men with divine approval. There were female prophets in the early church (Acts 21:9, I Cor. 11:5), in fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel that "your sons and daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17). Further, Priscilla and her husband Aquila are both mentioned as those who instructed Apollos more accurately concerning the Word of God (Acts 18:24-28).

Indeed, according to the teaching of Rom. 12, I Cor. 12-14, and Eph. 4:1-16 concerning the gifts of the Spirit, all spiritual gifts are given for the edification of the whole body of Christ. How can we imagine that God would give to women gifts of wisdom, knowledge, communication, which are for the edification of the church *except* for the adult male members? Most all of us men can testify to the great insight of godly women into the scriptures and their application of scripture to the Christian life. Can we really believe that we have sinned on those occasions when we have profited from the teaching of women?

3. Scriptural Limitations on the Teaching Role of Women

It is evident so far that Christian women are called by God to teach in terms of the general teaching office, and that on some occasions it is proper for such women to teach, to edify adult men. The only question remaining concerns the proper *occasions* for such teaching. Here the New Testament data is more difficult to understand, and we must exercise some caution.

I Cor. 14:34, 35 does place some limitation upon the teaching of women. From our earlier discussion, it is clear that this passage does not rule out *all* teaching of women. Evidently, then, the passage is circumstantially limited: i.e., it forbids women to teach in certain circumstances. Which ones? That is not easy to discern from the text. As with many of the detailed teachings in the Corinthian letters, the precise situation is evidently much better known to Paul and his original readers than it is to us.

Clearly it does not forbid all public exhortation by women, for such a view would make these verses contradict 11:5. Further, the exhortation to silence does not necessarily impose silence at all times and under all circumstances: compare verses 28 and 30, for example, along with Luke 18:39, Acts 21:14, 18, Matt. 13:34, Mark 4:34, John 18:20, Rom. 15:18, I Thess. 1:8, I Tim. 2:12.

Some members of your committee are impressed by James Hurley's¹ argument that Paul urges the women to be silent during the "judging of the prophets" described in verses 28-33. Another member of the committee, skeptical of Hurley's proposal, sees the passage as forbidding women to carry out the official preaching and teaching in public worship. On either interpretation, however, Paul in this passage essentially forbids to women the exercise of the *special* office. It does not appear, then, that this passage is relevant to the exercise of the general office except, perhaps, that it forbids to women any general-office teaching that might be *confused* with the teaching of the ordained elders.

I Tim. 2:11-12 also limits the teaching of women, but your committee is agreed that here too Paul has in mind the special office rather than the general. Paul is here writing about the way in which a woman is to *learn* (verse 11). She learns as we all do, through the means of grace. In that process, her role is to be submissive and quiet; she is not to take the role of a teacher. Paul then describes the qualifications for the special office in chapter 3. We do not believe that this limits general-office teaching by women except insofar as it urges us to permit no confusion between special-office and general-office teaching.

4. The Adult Sunday School Class

It is important to keep in mind that "Sunday School" as such is not mentioned in Scripture. As an institution, it is a product of the last hundred years. This does not mean that Sunday School is illegitimate. It is, we believe, a legitimate way of carrying out the biblical command to teach people "to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). But scripture does not give us a definition of Sunday School, nor a detailed methodology as to how that work must be carried on.

"Adult Sunday School" can mean many things: Consider President Carter lecturing to hundreds in the Baptist churches of the nation's capital. At the other extreme, in a tiny, newly planted church, Adult Sunday School might mean two or three people sitting around a table, discussing questions of importance to them. In some cases, one person might be delegated as "the teacher;" in other cases, a topic might be thrown to the group for free discussion, with no single person controlling the discussion. There are many degrees in between these extremes; some classes are more authoritarian than others.

¹ Hurley, James, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 188ff.

Sometimes Sunday School is much like a formal worship service, especially in those Sunday Schools that emphasize "opening exercises." Sometimes the pastor leads the Adult class; sometimes the Adult class is even an extension of the sermon. But that is not always the case. Sometimes there is no singing or liturgy at all, no offering, no special role for the teaching elders.

In Acts 18:24-28, do we not have something *like* an "Adult Sunday School Class?" To be sure, there are only three members: Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos. Priscilla and Aquila were trying to teach Apollos the word of God more completely and accurately; Apollos admitted his need and was learning from them. Granted the many forms that "Adult Sunday School" can take, may it not take this form among others? But if it does, surely it cannot be denied that a woman may in that class use her general-office gifts of teaching. That is plain in Acts 18.

One could argue that when "Sunday School" approximates formal worship and/or where leadership is generally monopolized by the ordained elders it would be inappropriate for a woman (or an unordained man!) to step into such a leadership role. We have seen that there are dangers in *confusing* the special office with the general.

On the other hand, granted the many things "Sunday School" can mean, your committee is unable to say that women should *never* use their general-office teaching gifts in a mixed group. There may be occasions such as the Priscilla-Aquila-Apollos discussion where the insight of a woman is much to be desired and where there is no confusion created between the general office and the special office.

Our conclusion, then, is that scripture does not forbid under all circumstances a woman to teach men and women in an Adult Sunday School Class. Three cautions, however, are important:

(1) Such use of women's gifts should not be used in such a way as to blur the distinction between the special and general offices. Appearances are important in this regard. When a woman teaches in church in such a way that she "acts like an elder" or claims the same authority as the elders, or even appears to be doing so to reasonable people in the congregation, then the session should act in gentleness and love to remove the danger. What "appears" wrong or "causes confusion" may vary from congregation to congregation and from situation to situation. We cannot, therefore, furnish a final, exhaustive list of what precisely can be done and not done. Application of the biblical principles to specific situations is something we all must do, especially those in leadership positions. God expects the church's leaders to be sensitive to dangers in specific situations and to act, speaking the truth in love.

(2) The New Hope Session rightly draws our attention to the importance of women teachers being "submitted to the session." Submission, of course, is not just literal obedience; it is an attitude, a fruit of the Spirit. Scripture requires such submission of all teachers in the church, especially those who are unordained. Unordained teachers must take pains to make plain that they do not rule in the church, that they teach only by the delegation of others. But perhaps this principle has special application to women who teach. I Tim. 2 stresses the attitude of women in the church, that they are not to be seeking or claiming inappropriate authority over others, but responding in quietness and submission to the teaching authorities. It is not easy to maintain such quietness and humility while at the same time teaching others.

(3) Consider the responsibilities given to women in scripture: bearing and teaching children, teaching other women, working at home, being "helpmeets" to their husbands. Making suitable allowance for differences in gifts and calling, it should be evident that most married women will have their hands full carrying out their scripturally mandated tasks, if those tasks are taken seriously. Many today believe that a woman cannot fulfill her God-given potential unless she is involved in church tasks normally carried out by men. On the contrary:

scripture calls women to a very rich variety of tasks which are of vast importance and which can challenge the most gifted. After carrying out such responsibilities, most people would be simply too tired to aspire to anything else. While we cannot condemn women teaching men in every circumstance, we reject the notion that women are unfulfilled without such experience or that the predominance of male teachers in Adult Sunday Schools amounts to "oppression" of women. _