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8/3/93

Women In the Church

The question of women's ordination has become in recent years something of a watershed, distinguishing those who judge current ideas by the Bible from those who do the reverse. It is important at this time to be clear on just what Scripture says and does not say about women's role in the church.

First, Scripture does not say that women may not teach. Titus 2 commissions older women to teach younger women, putting them in charge of teaching one quarter of the adult church membership (i.e. younger women) in addition to their accepted role as teachers of children (II Tim. 1:5, etc.).

Second, Scripture does not say that women may not teach men. Acts 18:26 indicates that both Priscilla and her husband Aquila were involved in teaching Apollos.

Third, Scripture does not say that women may never speak in a church meeting. I Cor. 11:5 refers to women praying and prophesying in worship. The attempt of some to argue that Paul mentions but does not approve this practice, is not persuasive. He requires women praying and prophesying to wear a covering while doing so. If he disapproved of them praying and prophesying as such, it would be like saying "if you rob a bank, be sure to wear a coat and tie."

Fourth, Scripture does not say that women can teach only under inspiration. I Cor. 11:5 probably does refer to charismatic, inspired praying and prophesying. But Titus 2 and Acts 18:26 certainly do not.

Fifth, Scripture does not say that women cannot teach in "formal" worship; for I have argued in my essay, "More Questions on the Regulative Principle" that there is no legitimate distinction to be drawn between "formal" worship and other kinds of worship so far as regulation is concerned.

What, then, is the nature of the restriction placed on women's activity in such passages as I Cor. 14:34-36 and I Tim. 2:11-14?

The context of I Cor. 14 has to do with authoritative teaching. In verses 26-28, that teaching comes through inspired prophecy, tongues (which is uninterpreted prophecy), the interpretation of tongues, and "words of instruction." In response to this authoritative teaching, there is a period of evaluation. Paul calls it "weighing carefully what is said" (verse 29). This too is an authoritative action. Those who weigh the prophecies are to judge whether the prophets are true or false. Does the passage from 26-36 describe a particular kind of service, or is it a portion of a meeting which includes other things? That is not clear from

the context. At any rate, when the time comes for authoritative teaching and evaluation, women are to keep silent... unless, that is, they themselves are inspired to prophesy (11:5).

The bottom line here seems to be that women are not to be authoritative teachers or evaluators of teaching. To put this into the context of church government, it means that women may not be elected to the office of teaching elder. (On this, compare James Hurley, @UN(Man And Woman in Biblical Perspective).)

I Tim. 2:11-14 also deals with authoritative, official teaching, although that is not entirely evident on the surface. "Teach" in verse 12 is paralleled by "have authority over." Clearly the reference is not to the type of situation in which Priscilla instructed Apollos in Acts 18:26. The teaching in verse 12 is the sort of teaching that goes with authority in the church. That this is the intent of Paul is confirmed by 3:1ff which discusses the qualifications of office holders. The basic idea here is the same as that of I Cor. 14:34-36: no woman may hold the office of teaching elder.

Is Paul's ruling based on merely local situations in Corinth or Ephesus, as some evangelical feminists have alleged? No. Paul says in I Cor. 14:33, Paul says that he gives the same orders in every church. And in I Tim. 2:13-15, he bases his policy on the created order and the nature of the Fall, events which condition all human beings and all of human history.

What of Gal. 3:28, that says that in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female?" Well, obviously Christ has not removed sexual differences in every respect! So we must make some distinctions. Clearly the passage is emphasizing the oneness of the church across barriers of nationality, social status and sex. All believers are equal in the salvation they have received by grace. But Paul never suggests that national distinctions, sexual differences, or even the master/slave distinctions disappear because of Christ.

That is about all I have to say about the issue. I do think that there is a good argument in favor of women deacons, and I recommend Robert Strimple's paper on that subject. As for the eldership, I think the case is certain. (The only uncertainty is whether the restriction should be more severe.) It is not a difficult point, and I think it cannot be evaded unless one wishes to reject at that point the authority of Scripture.

But if one rejects that authority here, where does one accept it? Limited inerrantists used to say that Scripture is authoritative on matters of faith and practice, but not on matters of historical detail, scientific accuracy, etc. But church office is certainly a matter of "faith and practice." If Paul has erred here, and some Christian feminists are quite candid in saying he did, where can we ever accept his word against some other current fashion?

This matter is serious. Women's ordination has become an accepted doctrine among many professing evangelicals, to such an extent that disagreement with this position is considered bigotry. Our stand is becoming more and more isolated, even among our evangelical and Reformed brothers and sisters. Much prayer is needed. I have no doubt that God will rebuke unbelief in his time; but the immediate future appears ominous._