

Is there really a reason

Charles C. Ryrie

While on vacation recently, I glanced at the Saturday church page of a large metropolitan newspaper. Among the twenty or so display ads for services the next day were three churches pastored by women. Two could be called mainline churches; one was a cult.

Typical? Probably. Even evangelical churches, on whose staffs women have long served in various capacities, are now ordaining or discussing ordaining women as pastors.

We've come a long way. In 1958 I wrote a book entitled *The Role of Women in the Church*. Four publishers rejected the manuscript because the subject was not relevant. Today interest in the subject is increasing, abetted no doubt by the popularity of the secular women's liberation movement.

On this subject as on all others the Bible is the evangelical's authority. The Bible, however, presents the ideal and does not deal with all the situations of contemporary church life. The first century church apparently had only one meeting each week, probably at night to accommodate the slaves who could not come any other time. There was no Sunday school, youth meeting, women's Bible study, mid-week prayer meeting, summer camp or conference, Youth for Christ, or Campus Crusade. Strictly speaking, then, the biblical teaching applies to the principal meetings of the local church. Nevertheless, application of that teaching to other church groups is certainly advisable, though not always clear.

WHAT PRINCIPLES does the New Testament give us that will help us

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know whether or not we should ordain women?

First, in the Body of Christ, the position of men and women is equal. There are no second class Christians. This is the meaning of Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NASB).

To the Jews, Gentiles were second-class. To slave owners, their slaves were less than second-class. To men, women were definitely second-class. But this verse declares that all are united equally in the Body of Christ. Now obviously this verse, though revolutionary, cannot mean that distinctions of sex are somehow erased when one becomes a Christian, any more than it can mean that a Christian Jew is no longer racially a Jew or that a Christian slave was suddenly and miraculously freed from slavery when he accepted Christ.

Equality of position does not conflict with differences and limitations. All believers are equally members of the Body of Christ, but they do not and must not all do the same job. God Himself has given each believer a unique combination of natural, acquired, and spiritual gifts. Not all have equal I.Q.'s. Not all have the same opportunities. Not all have the same spiritual gifts. And not all have the same ministries.

Distinctions of ministries because of sex, therefore, would not be incompatible with this diversity God has designed. In the Body there are diversities of functions; and in those diversities lies the strength of the one Body.

Second, the New Testament places the responsibility for leadership in the local church on men, not women. The New Testament called its first echelon of leaders elders; the second, deacons. But both groups were composed of men only. This is rather



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obvious, since one of the qualifications for both the elder and deacon is to be the husband of one wife (1 Tim. 3:2, 12).

Some churches today have both elders and deacons, some only deacons, some stewards, some an executive board. But whatever label is put on these leaders, the New Testament says they should be men. This strongly suggests that to ordain women as pastors, elders, or deacons is inappropriate.

Third, it seems that women were not permitted to teach publicly in the

for not ordaining women?



church. Only one thing is certain about the many viewpoints on the passages that bear on this question—that there will be no agreement until we get to heaven. Nevertheless we have to try to understand what these Scriptures are saying. Ignoring them won't make them go away.

In 1 Timothy 2 Paul gives guidelines for public worship. Concerning prayer in the church, he directs the men (the Greek word in verse 8 means “males”) to lead. He writes concerning the deportment of

women (evidenced in part by their dress), concluding that they are not permitted “to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence” (v. 14). This prohibition can hardly be cultural (that is, applicable only to the first century) since it is rooted in creation. Anyway, who could infallibly select which parts of 1 Timothy 2 apply today if the whole passage does not?

But doesn't 1 Cor. 11:5 say that women, if properly veiled, did pray and prophesy in the early church? Perhaps so; but if it does, then how can it be reconciled with 1 Cor. 14:34 which commands women in the same churches to be silent in the public worship service? Let me summarize several of the suggested solutions to this difficult interpretative problem.

Some suggest that Paul changed his mind in chapter 14 and prohibited there what he had permitted in chapter 11 (a view impossible to harmonize with verbal inspiration). Others suggest that Paul's prohibition was a hangover from his rabbinical training and thus inapplicable to the Christian church. This also casts doubt on the inspiration of the text.

Still others say that 1 Cor. 14:34 prohibits women only from disturbing the service by hysterical outbursts or by calling back and forth to each other, but it doesn't restrict orderly preaching. Though it is true that the word *speak* sometimes means *chatter*, it is the same word Paul used for his own preaching in the same letter (1 Cor. 2:13). So it would be difficult to prove that it means anything other than *speak* in 14:34.

In my opinion the most likely harmonization of 1 Cor. 11:5, 14:34, and 1 Tim. 2:14 is this: Paul (and of course the Spirit through him) did not permit women to become teachers in the church. This is the clear sense of two of the three passages. When he wrote of women praying and prophesying in 1 Cor. 11:5, he did so not with approval but simply

recognizing that they were doing it, albeit improperly. In other words, the women in the churches at Corinth had two strikes against them: strike one, they were praying and prophesying in the public meetings (which was in itself wrong), and, strike two, they did so unveiled (which compounded the wrong).

Even if one opts for a harmonization that concludes that women legitimately prayed and prophesied in the public meetings, a difficulty remains in using such permission as a basis for ordaining women today. Are prophesying and preaching synonymous? In the general sense that a prophet spoke God's message, yes. But the gift of prophecy in New Testament times included receiving a message directly from God through special revelation, being guided in declaring it, and having it authenticated in some way by God. Too, the prophet's message often included forecasting the future. Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied, though we have no indication whether they did this in the church (Acts 21:9). At any rate, the comparison of New Testament prophecy with today's preaching (by men or women) is at best only an analogy, not an exact equation.

EVEN THOUGH THE New Testament evidence seems to prohibit the ordination of women, this does not mean they have no ministry in the church.

First, women can teach. Indeed, the older women are commanded to teach younger women (Titus 2:4-5). Apparently this may be done in church or in homes, but it is restricted to a segregated audience. Such teaching, especially when done in the church, would have to be under the direction of the male leadership, and it should never conflict with a woman's responsibilities to her family.

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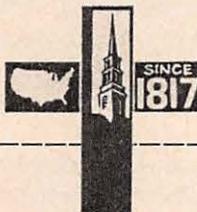
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What about single women ministering in para-church organizations? The Bible does not speak directly to such situations. The single woman has time to devote to the Lord's work, and many have done so with great benefit to the Body of Christ. However, the principles of male leadership and restriction on

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ministry to a mixed audience cannot be ignored.

Second, God gives women spiritual gifts. So often it is said that if a woman has gifts from God to pastor or teach, then what right has anyone to restrict her use of them? This kind of reasoning obscures the meaning of a spiritual gift and confuses the gift with where it is exercised. God gives women as well as men spiritual gifts. But gifts are abilities, not places or procedures of ministry. And the same God who gives gifts also directs where and how they are to be used.

A woman may even have the gift of pastor! This is the ability to shepherd people, and it can be used in the home, in the Christian school, in a Bible class. It can be used with children, young people, and older people. Hopefully, a dean of women in a Christian school would have the gift of pastor. How appropriate for a mother to use that gift with her children. Older women, teaching younger women according to Titus 2:4-5, could well exercise that gift on their flocks.

The gift must be distinguished from the place of ministry, from the age group on whom it is used, and even from our modern-day ecclesiastical organizational structure which usually equates the gift of pastor with the pastorate. Recognizing that the same God who gives gifts also directs where they should be used, I feel that a woman who has the gift of pastor is restricted from using that gift in what we call today the pastorate.

Third, women can serve in

various ways in the Lord's work. Though the Bible focuses mainly on the married woman in her home, Paul did speak of the unmarried woman caring for the things of the Lord in a context that must have included serving the Lord in some kind of ministry (1 Cor. 7:34). It is also clear that widows performed certain church-authorized and church-related functions including things which today might well be part of the job description of a church visitor (1 Tim. 5:10). But it is equally clear that women were not given leadership roles in the early church.

But what about Priscilla (Rom. 16:3), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Junia (Rom. 16:7), and the deaconesses in 1 Tim. 3:11? Were they not leaders in their churches?

Priscilla undoubtedly had the gift of teaching, but she apparently exercised it at home, not in the public meetings of the church (Acts 18:26). Phoebe was a servant (the general meaning of the word *deacon*) of the Cenchræa church, not an official deacon. Her designation as a "helper" (v. 2) is also an unofficial one, since that word was used outside the New Testament as an honorary title conferred on women for their works of charity.

In connection with Junia there are two problems: the form in the text could come either from a feminine name, Junia, or from a masculine name, Junias. We really cannot be sure if a man or a woman is referred to here. Further, the phrase "of note among the apostles" may just as accurately be translated "well-known to the apostles."

What about the women mentioned in 1 Tim. 3:11? Did they constitute a group of official leaders in the church, whether ordained or not? The word used is simply *women*, and can refer to deaconesses or to the wives of the deacons. Wives seems to be the more likely, since the normal word for deaconess is not used, and since the verse is in the middle of the verses that list qualifications for deacons. But either way, they helped in the ministry of the church, though not in the present-day sense of pastors.

Fourth, women workers might be recognized in some way by the

Christmas

*It all started with a Child, anyway.
As helpless
And dependent on the grown-up world
As any child today.*

A Gift

*Some gift an ancient might have said.
A world like this
And God gives us a child?
Unlikely.*

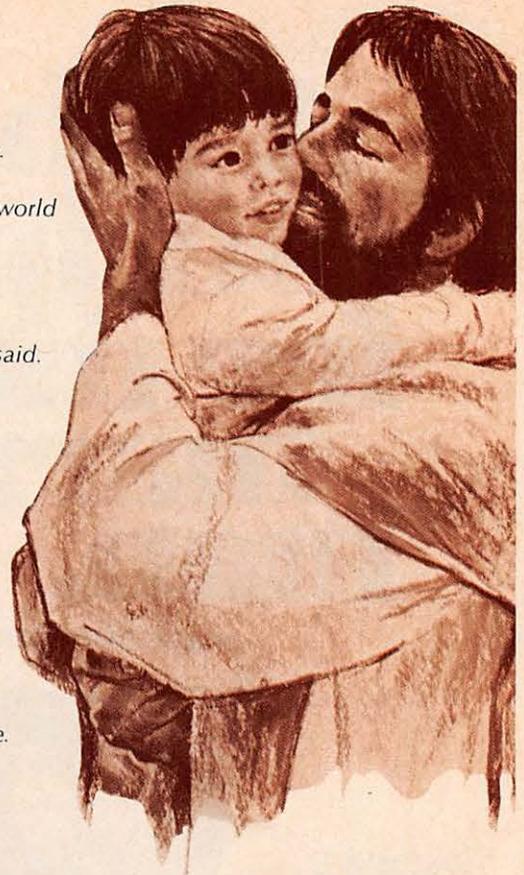
*He still gives children.
Not like the One.
But helpless
And dependent on the
grown-up world.*

Gifts

*Some treasured as He came to be.
Many too many
Despised, rejected
We hide our faces from them.*

Refused

*This Christmas
Let God give you a gift.
A child, dependent like He is
On your response.*



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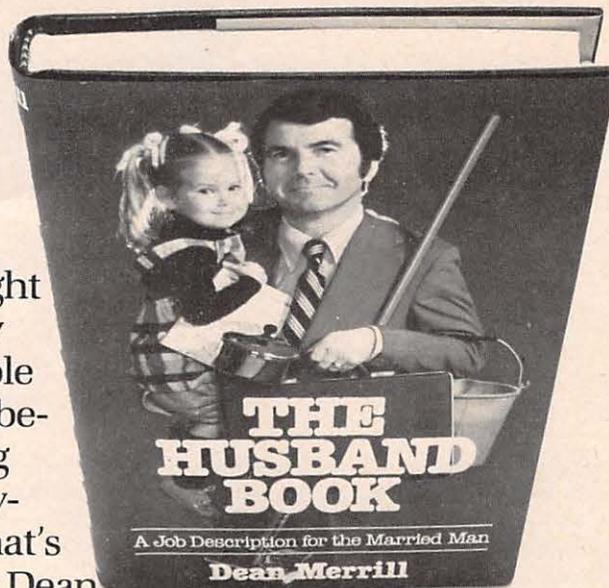
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church. Ordination today involves officially setting apart someone for ministry and authorizing that person to perform ministerial functions in the church, including (and this is usually the hallmark) baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the New Testament this was often signified by laying on of hands. There are examples of elders being ordained (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), helpers or deacons being ordained (Acts 6:6), the disciples (John 15:16), Paul (1 Tim. 2:7), and Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). But no women.

Ordination in these biblical instances was not as tight a concept as it is today. When we ask, "Should we ordain women?" we are asking whether a woman can pastor a church and administer the ordinances. In this sense there is no biblical basis for ordaining women.

Many churches will commission a woman worker (like a woman going to the mission field). Is this unwarranted? Not necessarily so, since it amounts to a public acknowledgment of the church's approval of her leading and a public dedication to her task.

Shall we ordain women? We must conclude no, since the Bible gives church leadership to men. Shall we exclude women from Christian service? Again the answer is no, though we must recognize that the Bible gives some definite guidelines about that service. Is this harsh? Again, no, if we believe that God knows best where each of us may best serve Him. M

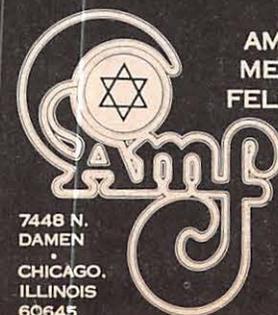
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