

WOMEN'S MINISTRIES AND THE BIBLE

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General Conference
Silver Spring, MD

I. Introduction

In some parts of the world church there are some serious concerns about the role of women in the church on the part of a number of church administrators, pastors and church members. In the past we, as a church, have not used to its full potential the skills and capacities of the female members of the church. There is an attempt on the part of the officers of the church at all levels to correct that failure. The Women's Ministries Department now seeks ways to integrate and involve women in a more direct and organized way into the mission of the church. There is absolutely nothing intrinsically evil or wrong with this most sincere concern. If properly guided women, like any other church member, can make a most significant contribution to the life of the church in proclaiming our message and nurturing new converts.

II. Misunderstandings

Some of the questions raised by some sincere Adventists with respect to a larger involvement of women in the life of the church seem to be based on at least a couple of misunderstandings. Obviously those who have serious questions on this issue are still our brothers, and they have firm convictions because of their concern for the church they love. But this topic should be examined for what it claims to be: The empowering of the female members of our church to make a significant contribution to the fulfillment of the mission of the church.

A. Women's Ministries and the Ordination of Women to the Gospel Ministry

It is argued by some that enlarging the role of women in the church will lead to their ordination as ministers. This argument appears to be based on fear, and fear tends to paralyze and blind us. Love for each other casts out fear. The work assignment of the Women's Ministries Department of the GC

does not include promoting the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. To conclude that the organized involvement of women in the mission of the church will result in their ordination to the ministry is not a logical conclusion. These are two different issues and when dealing with them the church should separate them from each other.

We all agree that God wants to use all of us, children, young people, and male and female church members. The fact that God uses all of them in different ways does not mean that they have to be ordained. He used Pharaoh! Pharaoh never became a minister or a prophet of the Lord. Our unfounded fears could be hindering God's desire to use women in a more effective way in the fulfillment of the mission of the church. The question of women's ordination is one the church is still discussing and only the work of the Spirit within the church could lead us to some consensus on that most difficult issue.

B. The Church is Like the OT Temple

The argument here is that since the church building corresponds to the temple of the OT, women should be allowed to have limited access to areas inside the church building. The argument is that in the church there is a holy place and a most holy place. The most holy place is represented by the platform raised a few inches from the level of the floor or from a first platform on which the Sabbath School is to be celebrated. This is based on a misunderstanding. In the OT the temple was the house of the Lord and not a place to which everybody had access. Women were not the only ones who did not have access to the interior of the temple; the Israelites themselves were not allowed to enter the holy or most holy places. Only the priest had access to the holy place and once a year the high priest had access to the most holy. The Israelites worshiped in the courtyard or outside the fence that surrounded the tabernacle.

The church as a place where believers gather for communion, to listen to the Word, for instruction, and to celebrate the sacraments is based on the Jewish practice of the synagogue. After the destruction of the temple of Solomon the Jews were exiled and soon they began to build small buildings where they gathered to read the Scriptures and to be instructed concerning the Torah. In the NT, Christians at first met together with the Jews in the synagogues for worship and for the reading of the Scriptures. They also had home-churches and later on they began to have their own buildings.

To argue that since the church building is the Christian equivalent of the temple of the OT, then women should not be allowed to preach from the pulpit, has no biblical or theological foundation. The Christian temple is the one in heaven and the high priest is Jesus and through him we all, male and female, have access to that most glorious place. At a more spiritual level, Paul refers to the Christian believer “male and female” as a temple of God in whom the Spirit dwells (1 Cor 6:19). He even applies the metaphor of the temple to the church as a community of male and female believers (Eph 2:21-22).

II. Role of Women in the OT

We should briefly address the question, how did God relate to women in the OT? Did He consider them to be inferior to men? Were they of equal value to their male counterparts before the Lord? Did He create the woman as an inferior intelligent being, a link between Adam and the beasts of the earth? Any attempt to diminish the value of a person on the grounds of gender should be questioned and rejected by the church. Christ died for both, men and women! Our true value is determined by the cross of Christ and at the light of the cross we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. We will mention only some of the biblical passages in which the role of women in the OT is described.

A. Women and the Temple

It is clear that in the Bible no woman was ever appointed to be a priest in the temple. The priests were all males from the family of Aaron. This restriction was not only applied to women but also to all other Israelites. However, women were not excluded from the sanctuary services. They could bring offerings and sacrifices to the Lord like any other Israelite (e.g. Lev 15:28-29). Moreover, they were allowed to work in the tabernacle. Exodus 38:8 states that there were women serving at the door of the tent of meeting. Unfortunately, we are not informed concerning the nature of that responsibility, but the point is that they performed a particular work in the sanctuary service (cf. 1 Sam 2:22; Luke 2:36-37). They could also become Nazirites. As such they had a more direct opportunity to serve the Lord in the sanctuary (Num 6:1-2).

B. Women as Prophetess

God selected not only men but also women to function as prophets in Israel. This was the most

important function assigned by God to a human being. The priesthood was important and so was also the privilege of being the king of Israel. But none of them could compare with the great privilege of being a spoke-man/women for the Lord. These men and women were the most important spiritual leaders of the people of God. The OT mentions by name at least four prophetesses: Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4-16), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20), and Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14; perhaps a false prophet). God uses whomever He wants to use and we should simply praise Him when He uses us and others to His glory.

III. Women in the NT

We find in the NT a significant amount of materials on the subject of the role of women, but here we will limit ourselves to some of the most important ones.

A. Disciples of Jesus

Jesus traveled with the twelve disciples and some women who had been healed by him and who decided to follow Jesus (Luke 8:1-3). They were not only his disciples but they also financed his ministry from their own funds. They were wealthy ladies. The case of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, sitting at the feet of Jesus to learn from him is a clear case of a disciple learning from the teacher (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus did not exclude women from his teaching ministry. It is obvious that if he taught them it was his intention to use them to teach others.

B. Identifying the Messiah

It is an interesting fact that before and soon after the birth of Jesus women were used by the Lord to identify the Child as the promised Messiah. When Mary visited Elizabeth, Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" Then, she referred to the child in Mary's womb as "My Lord" (Luke 1:42-43). During the presentation of Jesus at the temple, Anna, a prophetess, was used by the Lord to speak about the Child as the Redeemer (2:36-38).

C. Preachers of Salvation

Jesus used women during his ministry to bring the truth of his message of salvation to men. One of the best examples is the Samaritan woman. She listened to Jesus, learned from him and as a good

disciple went to the men living in the village and preached to them the message of salvation through Jesus. They joyfully accepted the good news (John 4:39).

Perhaps one of the most significant events associated with the participation of women in the proclamation of the gospel is the one directly associated with the event of the resurrection of Jesus. The gospels make clear that Jesus appeared first to women. Three of them went Sunday morning to the tomb (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James) and received the glorious news that the Lord had resurrected (Luke 24:3-10). The first ones to proclaim the risen Lord were women! They were commanded by the heavenly messenger to inform the disciples about this glorious event; when they heard about it they could not believe it. It was not that they were unwilling to accept the message because it was proclaimed by women. It was simply that they found it almost unbelievable; they lacked faith (24:11). John describes the conversation Jesus had with Mary Magdalene after his resurrection and the command he gave her: "Go . . . to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17). Those words are a proclamation of redemption entrusted to a woman in order to proclaim it to the other disciples of Jesus. In the case of the Samaritan, she went to those who did not know about Jesus; but in this case Mary preached to those who already knew Jesus.

D. Deaconess and Prophetess

According to 1 Tim 3:12, a deacon "must be the husband of one wife," giving the impression that only males could function as deacons in the church. Surprisingly Paul refers to a lady who was a "deacon" of the church in Cenchrea (Rom 16:1). He does not call her a "deaconess" (*diakonissa*, the female form of the noun), but uses the male form of the noun, "deacon" (*diakonos*). She was a woman who exercised the function of a deacon in that particular church. The task of deacons in the NT must have involved proclamation of the word and charity work (e.g. 1 Tim 3:8-13).

Women were with the disciples in the upper room when the Holy Spirit came and they also received the Spirit (Acts 1:14; 2:17). Men and women together were empowered by the Spirit to fulfill the mission that the Lord had entrusted to them. Some of the women in the apostolic church were endowed by the Spirit with the prophetic gift, as was also the case in the OT (e.g. Acts 2:17; 21:9). The

openness with which Jesus allowed women to be part of his ministry and the freedom they had in the activities of the church should also free us today to incorporate them even more in the fulfillment of the mission of the church.

E. Coworkers of Paul

Paul mentions several women who "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel" and includes them under the designation "my fellow workers" (Phil 4:3). In Romans he sent greetings to two couples, "Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (16:3; cf. Acts 18:26), and to "Andronicus and Junias," whom he describes as "outstanding among the apostles" (16:7). He mentions several other women who have worked "very hard in the Lord" (16:12). The picture one gathers from Paul's references to women is that there were a group of them who were directly involved in the proclamation of the gospel and in church activities.

III. 1 Cor 14:34-35

In 1 Cor 14:34-35 Paul clearly states that women are to keep silent in the churches. If the passage is interpreted in an absolute way, as some seem to be doing, then women are basically not existent in the church. It would mean that they could be involved in missionary work, proclaiming the gospel to friends and relatives, but whenever they go to church their freedom to proclaim the goodness of God would come to an end. That restrictive understanding of the role of women in church is not supported by the Scriptures. We already indicated that throughout the OT God used women in different roles. Prophetesses proclaimed their messages to God's people in public. Paul himself acknowledges that a woman can pray and prophesy in church; that is to say, women are not totally forbidden to speak in church. God, through the gift of prophecy, granted them that right and privilege (1 Cor 11:5).

The question is, what is it that Paul has in mind when he states that women are to keep silent in church? Here we should keep in mind several things.

A. Tensions During Worship

The church at Corinth confronted several different problems and one of them was proper behavior during worship. Different groups were promoting different ideas creating confusion and

tensions. This would suggest that the speech of women that Paul is prohibiting was in some way contributing to the state of confusion. They apparently were not controlling themselves, disrupting the worship service by improper behavior in the form of speech.

B. Women in Worship

The speaking of the women seems to be related to *questions* and possibly comments they made that did not contribute to proper order in worship. This is suggested by the fact that Paul tells them that if they had any *questions* they should ask them at home to their husbands and not in church.

C. Women Were to be Instructed

The advice Paul is giving does not deny to women the right to learn, but regulates the form the learning should take. In church they are to learn in silence, without speaking, subjecting themselves to the instruction that is being given. The learning could also take place at home with the husband, who could answer some of their questions.

D. Preaching is not the Subject

The discussion is not about women preaching in church but, as indicated, about the proper attitude in church when instruction is being given to them. This passage is misused when employed to forbid women to preach in church. Paul is dealing with a very specific situation and is advising church leaders on how to deal with it. It is therefore most probable that, Paul is restricting the only kind of speech directly addressed in these verses: asking questions. . . It was common in the ancient world for hearers to interrupt teachers with questions, but it was considered rude if the questions reflected ignorance of the topic. . . Since women were normally considerably less educated than men, Paul proposes a short-range solution and a long-range solution to the problem. His short-range solution is that the women should stop asking the disruptive questions; the long-range solution is that they *should* be educated, receiving private tutoring from their husbands. Most husbands of the period doubted their wives' intellectual potential, but Paul was among the most progressive of ancient writers on the subject. Paul's long-range solution affirms women's ability to learn and places them on equal footing with men. (C. S. Keener, "Man and Woman," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by G. F. Hawthorne

[Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993], p. 590).

Summarizing, the text suggests that in some of the churches women had become quite aggressive when receiving instruction. Paul is trying to control that situation, that is to say, controlling an abuse but not removing the privileges of praying and prophesying in public acknowledged by him in the epistle (11:5). In fact the Greek verb *sigao*, "to keep silent," could be also translated "to be still," in the sense of "to hold one's tongue." We should not read Paul's statement to mean that women are permanently forbidden to speak in church. The reason Paul gives for his counsel is that such conduct is unbecoming to a Christian lady in church. The church is not the place for a person to enter into verbal controversies with those in charge of instructing the congregation.

IV. 1 Tim 2:11-12

In order to deal with this passage it will be necessary to examine the NT use of the Greek word that Paul uses here. In this particular case this is not too difficult because the verbal form (*hesuchazo*), which means to be silent, be calm, is used only 5 times; the noun form (*hesuchia*), which means silence, rest, is used 4 times; and the adjective (*hesuchios*), which means quiet, tranquil, only 2 times. It is clear that the root seems to contain the ideas of silence and tranquility.

A study of the verb indicates that it is used to express three main ideas. *First*, it refers to keeping silence in order to avoid an open confrontation (Luke 14:4). *Second*, be silent in order to bring a discussion or confrontation to an end or under control (Acts 11:18; 21:14). *Third*, it expresses the idea of being inactive, at rest. This is illustrated in Luke 23:56, where we read that the women rested [lit. "were silent"] on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. This is the rest or the silence that is kept in order to avoid offending God, it has an ethical content. This type of silence becomes for Paul a Christian virtue; something to which all believers should aspire (1 Thess 4:11). Christian life should be a silent/quiet one, free from offenses to God and controversies.

From the study of the different usages of the verb we can draw the following conclusions. The verb is used most of the time in contexts where there are tensions and/or controversies. In a few other contexts it is implicit that through silence an offensive behavior is avoided. The verb designates a way of

speaking that disrupts social interaction. In other words, the verb describes a specific type of silence and not necessarily the absence of all speech. The church in Jerusalem listened to Peter and as a result they kept quiet (stopped arguing with him), and praised God, saying . . .@ (Acts 11:18). This silence makes communication possible. Since the verb does not necessarily mean the absence of words but rather the absence of controversial speech, the verb can be used to express the ideas of calmness and tranquility which characterizes the conduct of the believer and that does not disrupt the social and spiritual order.

The noun is used in the NT in basically the same way as the verb. *First*, it refers to the silence that brings to an end controversial language (Acts 22:2). *Second*, this is the silence that avoids controversial and disruptive speech (1 Tim 2:11-12). *Finally*, it designates the silence/quietness of the Christian life that avoids disrupting the community of believers. It is this last usage that we also find in the case of the adjective tranquil, quiet. According to Peter, women are to adorn themselves with a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Pet 3:4). But according to 1 Tim 2:2 this type of quietness should be a characteristic of all believers. They are to live quiet lives in all godliness.

Having examined the NT evidence we can now take a closer look at 1Tim 2:11-12. Here the context is very important. There is no doubt that Paul is concerned about controversies in the church. In vs. 8 he exhorts men to pray without anger or disputing. In the case of the women, in the verses under discussion, we notice that the apostle is also concerned about behavior and attitudes of women that could be disruptive in the church. In order to avoid problems he exhorts them to learn in quietness and full submission to the teaching and the teacher (2:11). This is something that in the first century was expected of a disciple (male or female) from a teacher. The implication is that women are described here as students and they are being reminded of their duties as such. When Paul says that they should "not have authority over a man" the context indicates that he is referring to attempts to control the teacher. The Greek term translated "have authority over" (*authenteo*) means "to control, dominate." What Paul is forbidding is the speech of the student that disrupts the learning process and creates conflicts between the women and the instructor. In this way the right of others is protected. The phrase

she must be silent@ (vs. 12) does not mean that she must remain speechless but that controversial speech is not to be accepted because it creates unrest. This is in perfect agreement with the use of the noun and the verb in the rest of the NT.

Why did Paul single out women? Possibly because some of them became the target of false teachers and had been paying attention to their instructions (2 Tim 3:6). They, like Eve, were being deceived (1 Tim 2:14). As a result they were bringing controversies into the church. It is this type of controversial speech that Paul is forbidding when he says, a woman . . . must be silent. It is important to notice that the passage is regulating how women are to learn, but it is not defining what they are to do in church once they have been properly instructed.

V. Conclusion

There is no biblical reason for excluding women from the proclamation of the Word in church, from the pulpit. They were also redeemed by the blood of Christ and are precious to him. The Lord wants to use all of us in the preaching of the Word; no one has the right to set limits to what He can do through children or through women. According to the Old and New Testaments God used women in powerful ways and in positions of great responsibilities. He has also used them in our church and wants to continue to use them to His glory. We must cooperate with the Lord by empowering them for that task. It should be clearly understood that we are not promoting the ordination of women to the ministry but the full use of their knowledge, skills and commitment to Jesus as their Savior and Lord in the proclamation of the gospel to the world. Time is short and the church should employ all its resources in order to finalize the mission entrusted to it by the Lord.

Jan 2003