

Women in Ministry

Why does the Church of the Nazarene ordain women? This question is posed by some from outside the denomination and sometimes arises from within. Even when not expressed, uncertainty about, if not hostility toward, women in ordained ministries can be a subtle issue affecting church boards and other leaders. This hampers or prevents the ministry of those women called by God to proclaim the gospel.

Why this resistance? For almost two millennia, many have allowed the surrounding sinful culture to squeeze the church into its mold, bolstered by use of a few biblical proof texts. In succumbing to sinful culture, they have ignored the breathtaking story of God's redemption that comes to supreme expression in Jesus. ...

We ordain women because we believe this is the only way in which we can respond faithfully to the work of the Spirit in all the people of God. The New Testament says very little about ordination, but talks much about the gifting for ministry that comes from God and the recognition and setting apart of people for special ministry and leadership by the Church. Were we to refuse to acknowledge God's call of our sisters as well as our brothers, we would set our face against the radical story of God's deliverance of humankind.

This story is not new. It starts from creation, reaches its full revelation in Christ, is the content and mission of God's holy people now, and is the goal of all things. The good news, the gospel, is that God in Christ is reconciling His alienated people to God and to each other. God has entrusted this ministry of reconciliation to His transformed people.

In Genesis, God creates and the entire created order, inanimate and animate, is pronounced good. ...

The second chapter of Genesis gives a stunningly beautiful picture of the way things work when everything in the garden is according to God's creative purposes. ...

... The woman is the *'ezer* (helper) of the man.

"Helper" when referring to a person in the Old Testament always refers to God, except for the reference here and one reference to David. It is not understood as an expression of submission. Rather she is an equal partner who serves God *with* the man. ...

The story in Genesis 3:8-10, picturing the marred relationship between God and His creatures, is one of the most moving in Scripture. The disastrous result is that all relationships within the created order have been distorted: God with humans, humans with humans, and humans with created order. ...

With Jesus' coming, the cultural pattern of the world organized in sinful rebellion against God is challenged at every point. Jesus gathers around himself a new people, transformed by the presence of the Holy One of God and called to be the vanguard of God's redemptive work in the world.

... The barriers of sinful human culture do not belong in this new people. Rather, in their own God-centered community, they are to model the way God intended people to live.

... So, how does Jesus go about His mission? First, He calls disciples, fishers in Galilee, neither descendents of David nor Pharisees. The Pharisees protect God's holiness by erecting and maintaining boundaries. But Jesus is different. He calls people to himself. From those who respond He names twelve apostles-circumcised, Jewish, male apostles. (Some note that Jesus only called males to be the apostles and therefore, men are to be the leaders. To our knowledge, no group insists that all ordained leaders also be circumcised and Jewish.) ... Jesus invites all who would come after Him to take up their crosses and follow.

Those around Jesus, then, are on His mission and proclaiming the Good News. ... [b]oundaries are broken as the unclean are transformed and empowered for mission. Those excluded are now included. ...

... Jesus challenges social and religious convention. His treatment of women fits this pattern exactly.

Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman at noon, who then proclaims the good news to all the people in her village. He speaks warmly to a woman with a gynecological disorder who has knowingly touched Him and risked making Jesus impure. ...

We know of eight women by name who join His itinerate mission and several of them support His mission. He also teaches women-another breach of convention. Mary, the sister of Martha, is the paradigm of loving God with all the heart. He raises a dead girl to life and heals the daughter of a Gentile woman. He accepts the gratitude and love of a notorious woman who has been forgiven. He tells men that the solution to lust is a changed heart, not removing women from public view.

In each of these cases, Jesus steps outside of society's norms and conventions because a new era has dawned.

In fact, women hold a surprising prominence in the life and ministry of Jesus. Women feature in Jesus' genealogy. The voices of Elizabeth and especially Mary are at the center of the birth stories of John and Jesus. At the cross, the women who had followed Jesus and ministered to Him in Galilee are those who stay to the end, witness His gruesome death, and care for His body. On Easter morning, women are the first witnesses to the empty tomb. According to John, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen one. Thus, they feature unexpectedly and prominently in the story of Jesus from beginning to end.

Taken as a whole, the place of women in the story of Jesus is countercultural at point after point. Jesus liberates and empowers women in the face of a society that marginalized and excluded. The old barriers just do not apply in the new people of God.

The implications of Jesus' words and actions affect the development of the early Church. The story of Pentecost clearly indicates that women were among the 120 disciples who were in the upper room waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15). Peter's sermon at Pentecost quotes the prophet Joel, emphasizing God's gender inclusiveness in receiving the Spirit and proclaiming the Word: ...

Luke notes that more and more men and women believed and were added to the Church (Acts 5:14). Women and men were persecuted by Saul and dragged off to prison (Acts 8:3, 22:4). Many prominent women are mentioned in Acts, including Timothy's mother and grandmother, Lydia in Philippi, Philip's four daughters with the gift of prophecy, as well as Priscilla, who along with her husband, taught Apollos-who later became an important teacher in the Church ...

Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles and great missionary of the early Church, summarized his understanding of restored human relationships in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." ...

The conflict of Peter and Paul (Galatians 2:11-14) indicates that "neither Jew nor Greek" had social implications. Paul asked Philemon to treat his runaway slave, Onesimus, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Philemon 15-17). Paul did not abolish slavery. But his gospel sowed the seeds of its destruction. How tragic it is that it took the church almost 1,800 years to acknowledge that slave ownership was a social division that was incompatible with the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, counter to first century Jewish and pagan culture, Paul confirms that the sexual relationship between husband and wife is a matter of mutual respect and rights. In 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, while describing proper worship, Paul declares the interdependence of men and women and allows the local church to decide what type of dress would best express the restored relationship between women and men. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 implies that both men and women are praying and prophesying in the church services. These confirm that Galatians 3:28 has social as well as spiritual implications.

Paul mentions twelve women coworkers by name in his letters. Three are leaders of house churches: Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), and Apphia (Philemon 2). Lydia, who welcomed Paul to her house in Philippi, could be added to this list as the house church would have continued, most likely, in her house (Acts 16).

In Romans 16 Paul names four women who worked "very hard" in the Lord: Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis. In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul mentions Euodia and Syntyche as fellow workers and those who "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel along with Clement." Phoebe is designated in Romans 16:1-2 as a *diakonon* (deacon or servant) of the church in Cenchrea. In 1 Timothy 4:6, the NIV translates this same word as "minister" of Christ Jesus. Although there is little evidence in the New Testament that the early Church ordained people in the same way we do today, this "may designate her generically as a member of a special leadership group within the church."

The last name has an interesting history, which shows how the later Church got caught up in the sinful mold of the world. In Romans 16:7, Paul calls Andronicus and Junias "outstanding among the apostles" who were in Christ, before Paul. The gender of Junias (Junia in New Revised Standard Version and Today's New International Version) cannot be determined from the Greek. However, there is no evidence that this name existed as a man's name in the first century, while there is much evidence that it existed as a woman's name. In the fourth century, Church father John Chrysostom understood the reference to be to a woman.ⁱⁱ Later church leaders could not accept that a woman could be called an apostle, let alone an outstanding apostle, and today many translations and commentaries reflect that bias. ...

... [t]here are texts in Scripture, when taken out of their first century context, which appear to run against the grain of the countercultural direction of the gospel. In some Christian traditions, a few of them are used as proof texts to exclude women from ministry.

What are we to make of these texts? First, in some instances it is crucial to understand these texts in the first century contexts in which they were written and in terms of the issues that were being addressed. ... Second, other passages, when considered in their wider literary and theological context, drive forward a new creation view of society based upon justice and love.

When read in that way, their language exposes the fatal flaws in the conventional, oppressive structures of society.

Take Ephesians 5:1-6:9, for example. This passage contains what scholars call a "household code." It is one of several passages (Colossians 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:1-10, 1 Peter 2:18-3:7) that describe and seek to "Christianize" the traditional first century Jewish and pagan relationships of those in households. The patriarch was the public face of the family and any disrespect shown to him in public would bring shame on the whole household unit, which also included slaves, employees, and sometimes clients.

The Ephesian version of this code is set in the context of a wider discussion on godly living. The Ephesians are called to imitate God and to walk in love (5:1-2). They are to be filled with the Spirit (5:18b). Paul then begins this household code with the prime evidence of Spirit-filled living: Christians are to be submissive to each other as a general rule. Then follows the traditional comment in verse 22: "wives to your own husbands as to the Lord" (author's translation).

The verb "be submissive" is not in this verse and derives from the idea in verse 21 that all Christians are to be submissive to each other. It is as if Paul were saying, "for example, wives [be submissive] to your own husband." Then Paul becomes extremely countercultural. The command to the husbands to love their wives as they love their own bodies is describing Christian submission of husbands to wives in language that they could understand and accept. And this mutual submission is exactly how Christians are to "walk in love."

The language of headship found in verse 23 is also descriptive of the first century understanding of the role of the patriarch. Paul uses this cultural analogy to describe how he views the relationship of Christ to the Church. Some today read this passage backward from how the author originally meant it, understanding the role of Christ and the Church to be an example of the Christian marriage relationship. The author did not intend the passage to be read this way! Clearly, the principle from this passage is that all Christians, as the Church, are to be submissive to Christ and mutually submissive to each other.

1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 are often used to deny women leadership or ordination in the Church. They have similar contexts in that both deal with problems of chaotic worship in the churches and are instructing Gentile converts who were most likely coming out of the mystery religions. These mystery religion groups often met in homes and the purpose of their rituals was to achieve an ecstatic state of communion with their gods. Women as well as men participated equally in these chaotic worship services with women, especially in Ephesus, often in charge of these services as priestesses.

Both churches had ethnic Jews as well as Gentiles among their members. The chaotic worship style practiced in Corinth and Ephesus was very uncomfortable for the Jewish Christians who were used to the public, ordered worship of the synagogue. Actually, Paul has already addressed this issue in 1 Corinthians 11:2-11, where he fully affirms the authority of women to prophecy in worship. His means of affirmation emerges from his Jewish background but with a distinct countercultural twist. Women should wear the symbol of authority when they prophesy—a head covering, just as a rabbi would in worship. Now Paul again affirms the need for unity in worship and he asks both sides to give a little to accomplish this goal.

Because these two passages are highly contextualized it is not wise to base a universalized principle or dogma on them without considering the cultural context very carefully. These passages need to be interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture on the one hand and the

specific contexts of Corinth and Ephesus on the other. The specific statement in 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent," summarizes the issues for women's ordination for both passages. And it demands careful reflection if it is to be misused.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34, Paul says "Let **the** women keep silent in the churches." C. S. Cowles comments: "The use of the definite article in the Greek focuses attention upon a specific group of women, not **all** women. Which women? Those who, through exuberant and chaotic speech, were creating confusion and disorder in the services" (Cowles, 133). In addition, Paul chooses the word for keeping silence that means "voluntary silence" when he could have chosen words meaning "to muzzle, tie shut" or "stillness and quietness" (Cowles 133). Cowles paraphrases this verse: "Let **the** women voluntarily cease from idle chatter and noisy conversation and maintain a reverent attentiveness during worship, as 'the law' of common courtesy and social convention dictates" (Cowles, 135).

This "voluntary silence" is also the word Paul uses in commanding the whole congregation: "Let him/her be silent in the church, and let him/her speak (silently) to himself/herself and to God" (1 Corinthians 14:28, *author's translation*). If we were to apply this command as verse 34 has been applied to women, no one would speak in church unless there was an interpreter!

We find a similar context in 1 Timothy 2 as far as the silence issue is concerned. But 1 Timothy brings in two more prohibitions that are often used to deny the use of women's ministry gifts. Verse 12 begins: "I do not permit a woman to teach." First, we observe that this is Paul's current position (*I am not presently permitting*, present active). It is not a command for all time from God. In light of the situation in Ephesus, Paul did not think it was best for the women to teach. Why would Paul say this?

In the first century, Jewish and Gentile girls were usually only trained in skills needed to fulfill their domestic roles. Some Jewish writers actually stated that women did not have the mental capacity to study the Torah and so were excused from even hearing the Law (Cowles, 143). A close reading of 1 and 2 Timothy indicates that at this time the church in Ephesus "was plagued by all sorts of strange philosophical mythologies" (Cowles, 141). 2 Timothy 3:6 indicates that Ephesian women had a tendency toward unorthodox teaching.

In contrast to his culture, Paul commanded that these women be taught the Torah and the Gospels (verse 11) while being submissive to their teachers and learning quietly which was the custom of the day for male students as well. This, of course, is merely following the pattern of Jesus, who teaches women (see Luke 10:28-42). Perhaps Paul would have changed his policy for Ephesus later on after these women had been taught the Scriptures. We do not hear of him prohibiting Priscilla from teaching Apollos. Paul does recount the damage his own ignorance caused (1 Timothy 1:12-14).

Paul also goes on to say in 1 Timothy 2:12 that he does not permit women "to have authority over a man." The Greek word (*authentein*) translated "authority" is a rare word, which is only used here in the New Testament, and is best translated "to dominate or domineer." In secular Greek this word had the meaning "to commit a murder, to kill with one's own hands."

"It suggested monarchical authority where one has life-or-death power over another" (Cowles, 146). This dominance goes directly against Paul's principle in Ephesians 5:21 of mutual submission. Although it is unclear, there is some evidence to suggest that women priestesses in Ephesus exerted this kind of authority over their worshipers in the pagan religions.

Good interpretation requires that any universal principle be found in the whole of Scripture and not just drawn from proof texts that have been taken out of their cultural and literary contexts. It would be foolish indeed to expect these texts to reflect 21st century notions. We have had centuries of reflection on the implications of the gospel on society and individuals. We have been challenged again and again to be transformed persons and to refuse to allow the surrounding culture to squeeze us into its mold. How sad, then, to see some today make the social conventions of the first century, such as slave ownership or patriarchal societal structure, normative for Christians now, as though the gospel had no transforming impact whatsoever on the views of Spirit-filled Christians who wish "to walk in love."

But even within the cultural constraints of their day, we should not underestimate the transforming power of the gospel. Jesus Christ came to bring restoration to creation that had been marred by sin. ...

The sinful patterns of society are challenged again and again within the community of the gospel where householders honor slaves, and husbands love wives. We are called to continue this process of working out this principle of mutual submission in our own contexts. That is why the Church of the Nazarene recognizes God-called and God-gifted women by ordaining them.

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