

WOMEN MINISTERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

C. E. Cerling, Jr.*

Were there women ministers in the New Testament Church? This is one of the most important, but least posed, questions in the women's liberation debate. We have a marked tendency to focus on Paul's clear statements in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 that he does not allow women to speak in church. But even in 1 Corinthians, where he speaks strongly against women speaking in church (ch. 14), he gives detailed instructions about women's dress when they are speaking (ch. 11).

The New Testament picture of the ministry is unclear. Who has authority over whom? It is difficult to tell. Apostles are obviously first, but who comes after them? Presbyters (elders)? Deacons? Prophets? Fellow workers with the apostles? Deaconesses? Who has authority over whom? Did women hold any offices other than that of deaconess? Is it possible that some ministerial offices were superior to others, according to what the New Testament says? Based on a rare consensus among New Testament scholars, the first question receives a simple "no" for an answer. The second question is not so easy.

If we would claim there were women apostles, many people would raise their hands in horror. There is almost an innate feeling that apostles should be men. For that reason we want to illustrate the complexity of this subject with a New Testament name for ministers that is not emotionally loaded. Were women "fellow workers" with the apostles? We can ask this question because few people have formed an opinion ahead of time.

In Philippians 4:2 f., Paul names two women who have "labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers." We know that Paul speaks of women because he names them as such. They worked with Clement and Paul in the gospel. We do not know if Clement was a minister or layman. Nothing then can be learned about the word "fellow worker" from what we know about Clement.

Paul uses the word "fellow worker" (*synergos*) twelve times. (It is used only one other time in the New Testament.) He uses it primarily of co-workers without in any way suggesting they are equal with him. In 1 Corinthians 3:9 it is equivalent to deacon (as is also the case in the variant in 1 Thessalonians 3:2). Ten of the twelve times he uses this word of someone who was a minister. (Philippians 2:25 is a questionable instance.) He also uses it of Priscilla and Aquila and of Philemon, none of whom was a minister. Does this mean that these two women were ministers? Not really. We cannot ask Paul to use a word exactly the same way each time. Besides, he does use it on two occasions of lay people.

*C. E. Cerling is a doctoral candidate at Aquinas Institute of Theology, Dubuque, Iowa.

Even if he speaks of Clement as a minister it does not mean he was intending to say these women were also ministers. All we can say is that they appear to have performed ministerial duties. This means that they may have been ministers, but possibility and probability are two greatly different things. The picture of women in the New Testament ministry, just as this illustration shows, is not clear.

Another ministerial office is that of elder or presbyter. This word is used 67 times in the New Testament. Thirty-one times it clearly refers to a minister. Thirty-one references are to elders among the Jews, a parallel office in Judaism. Twelve times in Revelation the reference is to elders. Apart from Revelation, then, there are 19 clear references to elders as ministers in the New Testament Church. Elders, bishops, and deacons are never put together in such a way that we could say which is the highest office. Therefore we cannot say that women could occupy one office but could not rise to a higher office. The fact that women are not elders does not mean they could not have been. It only means there is no instance in the New Testament where they were. If they held other ministerial offices they might have held this one, even though we have no reference establishing that fact.

Everyone agrees that there were no women apostles. But that agreement is limited to our time. The early Church's interpretation of Romans 16:7 poses a knotty problem. Paul appears to call a woman an apostle. The textual problem of whether he wrote "Junia" or "Julia" is insignificant for this discussion. Today we know that the name has a feminine ending but was a common name for a man. Many early interpreters of this text nonetheless thought Paul was speaking about a woman who may have been an apostle. This is very important. In fact, it is probably one of the most important pieces of evidence on this whole subject. These men were mistaken in thinking a woman was an apostle. There is no evidence for that. What is significant is this: Those living closest to New Testament times saw nothing wrong with a woman's being an apostle. We do not know at this great distance whether many women were ministers. But the men who lived closest to the time of the New Testament were unconcerned about a woman's being an apostle, which suggests that women were ministers in New Testament times. If they had not been, this instance would have been the subject of considerable comment. This evidence provided by Arndt and Gingrich is in itself sufficient to still all claims that women cannot be ministers. Nevertheless we continue.

The office of deaconess provides the clearest New Testament example of women in ministerial office. "Deacon" is an unusual word, having the meaning of servant. When so used it applies to all Christians (Mt. 20:26), but it also means a minister. If a woman holds the office of deacon we could say she should be a servant of the Church, but that in no way negates the fact that she holds office as a minister.

Two passages are pivotal. In Romans 16:1 Paul calls Phoebe a deaconess. Because Paul also calls her a sister, no one can claim she was really a man. Because Paul calls her a deacon (*diakonos*) and a helper (*prostatís*), he is probably referring to her as a ruler or one of the rulers of

the Church. Paul uses "deacon" only of ministers, never in a clear-cut instance speaking about people who are not ministers. (You can argue with this opinion because there are some debatable instances, but no certain usage having a meaning other than minister exists in Paul.) He also uses the verb form of "helper" exclusively of Church leaders. Again, someone can say she was only a servant of the Church in Cenchreae, but is not that an attempt to avoid an obvious statement of Scripture? The most natural way to take this is that she was a minister in the Church. This does not mean she was the chief minister; it does not mean she ruled over her husband; it simply means she was a minister. She could have been under the authority of her husband or unmarried, but she was a minister.

The second important passage is 1 Timothy 3:11. Here there is a problem. The Greek word in this passage is *gynaikas* which can be translated as "women," "wives," or "deaconesses." Most of the time it means "women" or "wives," but we think it means "deaconesses" in this passage. "Similarly" or "likewise" (*hōsautōs*) seems to make the reference to a new subject, deaconesses. Other arguments are important. There is no article before the word, which suggests that a possessive of some kind would be needed for the word to refer to the wives of deacons (such as *their* wives or the *deacons'* wives). It is also strange to single out the wives of deacons without also mentioning the wives of bishops. Bishops' wives are not mentioned in 3:1-7, further suggesting that the word refers to deaconesses. Finally, there is no New Testament word for "deaconess." When Paul spoke about Phoebe the deaconess he used the masculine word referring to deacon. He could not do this here because he is already speaking about deacons who are men. Someone might say that this is the lowest ministerial office in the New Testament and therefore women should be restricted to lower work, but we have already suggested that the New Testament ministerial offices are not hierarchical. Thus, if women were deacons, they could hold any office.

Obviously there is another position. Does not the KJV translate this "wives"? Apart from the general male bias against women ministers in 1611, there are two arguments favoring "wives." If the word means "deaconesses" it should have an article in front of it. But if this is so, why does Paul not use the article before deacons in verse 8? Some would say that if we translate the word as "deaconesses" here then we must translate it the same way throughout the pastoral epistles. That is absurd. The New Testament word for "women" has a number of different meanings. If we argue for absolute consistency in the pastorals it destroys the sense of other passages. Paul uses the word with a variety of meanings. Each in its context must be carefully examined to see whether he means "women," "wives," or "deaconesses."

New Testament ministers are called apostles, presbyters or elders, and deacons. Are they also called prophets? Ephesians 2:19-22, 3:4 f., and 4:11-14 suggest that prophets were also ministers in the New Testament. Not only were they ministers, but they were important ministers, for Paul calls the prophetic gift the most important gift (1 Cor. 14:1). Is this also true of the prophetic office? There appears to be a

difference between the prophetic gift discussed in 1 Corinthians 11-14 and the office of prophet discussed in Ephesians. Apparently it was possible to prophesy (as in 1 Cor.) without being a prophet (as in Eph.). The two are not totally separate, but there appears to be enough difference to treat the office as distinct from the gift.

Revelation 2:20 speaks about a false prophetess. This reference implies that women were prophets (although this might refer to a prophetic gift). If there could be a false prophetess, there must have been true prophetesses that one might imitate. A false prophetess could not exist unless there were true women prophets to imitate, unless she would open herself to immediate rejection by the Church because she, as a woman, was claiming a right women could not claim.

But a clearer instance exists in Acts 21:9. Philip had four daughters who prophesied. From the way these women are mentioned we do not think they just prophesied once. They were characterized by their prophesying, which suggests that they prophesied over a long period of time or that they functioned as prophets. Nevertheless, the gift of prophecy was not always an isolated occurrence. A person might have the gift of prophecy on many occasions. Therefore we cannot say absolutely that these women held the office of prophet. Women clearly prophesied, but we cannot prove they held the prophetic office.

The clearest instance of women prophesying is in 1 Corinthians 11. Because of the context of the discussion there is universal agreement that these women were not prophets; they simply prophesied. But if prophecy included teaching, and there is no reason for thinking it did not, how does this square with 1 Timothy 2:11 f.? Does Paul contradict himself? We do not think so. Women can be ministers so long as they are not in authority over their husbands.

It appears that the pivotal point with Paul, never clearly spelled out but always assumed, is that women cannot assume authority over their husbands. This would contradict the God-established order of creation (1 Cor. 11:1-12) and the order of salvation (Eph. 5:22-33). His objection could be framed as a general statement because women are almost always married. If this assumption is correct, then women could work as ministers in any place where they would not be assuming authority over their husbands. Examples of such positions would be (1) associate relationships where the husband would be the senior minister, (2) widows, and (3) unmarried women working as ministers.

What conclusions can we draw from this? Were women ministers in the New Testament Church? The picture is not clear, for the picture of a woman's place in the early Church is confusing. She never performs strictly ministerial functions in a clearly defined case. Nevertheless, she is active in all other forms of church work and activity. In spite of this the evidence favors a mildly positive answer. Women in some instances were ministers in the New Testament Church. This appears to be the case with deaconesses. It also appears to be true of prophetesses. The early Church was not disturbed about a possible woman apostle.

In the past, men have focused their attention on Paul's strong prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11f. Women should not teach in church.

Because church members must submit to the minister of the church, and because men should never submit to women, women should not be ministers. But is this the case? Does a woman have to be in authority over her husband when she is the minister in a church? We do not think so. A single woman is obviously not in authority over her husband. Why can she not be a minister? A woman can be her husband's assistant or associate. Then she is not in authority over him. Women need only be prevented from being in authority over their husbands. It is not necessary to prohibit them absolutely from the ministry. We find this the only satisfying reconciliation between Paul's statements and his conduct, between Paul's statements and the instances of women ministers in the New Testament Church. Women can be ministers so long as this does not create confusion in the home.

"Hold it now," exclaims an objector. "Doesn't Paul state clearly in the Bible that women are not to teach in church? Aren't you interpreting some less-than-clear instances in such a way that they conflict with the clear teaching of the Bible? Remember this hermeneutical principle: The clear interprets the unclear."

This objection is monumental for the evangelical. The Bible as God's Word is inspired and therefore without error in the original manuscripts. This teaching implies that the Bible is consistent within itself, that no two statements of Scripture contradict each other. For evangelicals this leads to an important hermeneutical principle: Unclear passages of Scripture are interpreted by clearer passages. Never should a clear statement of Scripture be interpreted by an unusual meaning for the purpose of reconciling it with unclear teaching. The case at issue is the role of women in the New Testament. The teaching of Paul is clear: Women should not teach in church. Any attempt to interpret this clear statement by a less clear statement is a violation of an important rule of hermeneutics.

We agree completely with the statement that a clear passage should interpret any unclear passage. We are in full agreement with the corollary that no unclear passage should be used to interpret a clear passage. Our contention is this: Paul makes clear statements that women should not teach in church, but he also makes one clear statement that permits women to teach in church (1 Cor. 11). He would not give regulations for women speaking in church if they could not speak in church. He would not lay down regulations for their speaking to the congregation (which in all probability included men) if they were absolutely not permitted to teach men. Moreover, in at least one clear instance a woman is a minister in the New Testament (Phoebe in Rom. 16:1) and in another instance we think it is clear that Paul gives qualifications for women who are ministers (1 Tim. 3:11). Therefore we are not attempting to explain a clear teaching prohibiting women from speaking in church by unclear passages that suggest men and women are equal in Christ and therefore women should be ministers. We are attempting to reconcile apparently contradictory statements in Paul and contradictory practices in the New Testament Church. Our commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture demands that we search for a principle that

will reconcile these apparently opposing statements and practices. If the Bible is inerrant, Paul cannot state that women cannot teach men and at the same time provide regulations for occasions when they teach men unless he is operating by an unstated principle that reconciles these two teachings. We think that principle relates to the husband's leadership role in the home. Women may minister to men so long as they are not in a position of authority over their husbands.

The ministry in the New Testament is not clearly defined. If it were, there would not be the diverse forms of church government extant today. Each claims at least partial authority for its particular system from Scripture. The basic ministries of the Church have been adapted to meet the demands of the day—and of the denomination. All this leads back to the question of women and the ministry. The New Testament's lack of clarity in this area suggests that detailed rules and regulations for all time cannot be found. We can, however, discover the principles the apostles used. We think they are as follows: (1) Women have a right to enter the ministry of the Church based on their relationship to Jesus Christ and the example of the New Testament; (2) because the order of creation and the order of salvation demand that a woman be subordinate to her husband, a woman should not minister in an area where she would reverse that order and be in authority over her husband. The practice of the New Testament is not normative for today. We no longer greet one another with a kiss of love. The principle underlying the practice is normative. We greet one another with a handshake, a modern display of love and concern.

“Only by giving earnest consideration to the two viewpoints of hierarchical order and equality in the Body of Christ can we arrive at a true Christian understanding of the dignity of the sexes.”¹ We think this consideration is only found in the solution posed here. There is no justification for limiting women ministers to work with other women but not with men, as George Knight does.² In a strongly male-dominated society the New Testament shows women occupying a limited number of leadership roles. Nonetheless they are instructed to be subordinate to their husbands. The tension remains. It cannot be removed. But even this tension suggests a change from the present position of most evangelical churches. Even a change in the direction we have suggested would be revolutionary for most churches because it gives complete freedom to unmarried women to enter the ministry and freedom for married women to work as ministers with their husbands. It also provides complete freedom for women to occupy almost any position in church.

The New Testament attitude toward women points in the direction of change. Christianity grew out of the soil of Judaism. Judaism denigrated women. Although it maintained high standards of morality, it treated women poorly in all other areas. Jesus Christ began to change this attitude by his treatment of women. The disciples caught his attitude

¹Otto Piper, *The Biblical View of Sex and Marriage* (New York: Scribner's, 1960), p. 94.

²G. W. Knight, III, in *JETS* 18/2 (Spring 1975), pp. 81-91.

and incorporated it in a limited degree into the early Church. A parallel with slavery is at least partially possible. The relationship of love between master and slave created by spiritual brotherhood in Christ provided an eventual foundation for the abolition of slavery. The attitude of Jesus Christ led the early Church to change its attitude from that of Judaism to his own. But the change was not major because of the practical problems confronting the Church. As it moved out, it did so primarily through synagogues. In synagogues female leadership would not have been accepted. In spite of this, some women performed leadership tasks, pointing out the direction the Church should take, and so pointing out the direction the Church should move in our day. Now that male prejudice against women is diminishing, they should be given greater and greater leadership responsibilities in the Church. The principle of subordination in marriage must be retained as Biblical, but women's leadership roles should be expanded to the limit allowed by Scripture.

Too often attempts to examine this subject are extreme in their conclusions. Paul's statements about women are overthrown in their entirety as irrelevant—as applicable only to his time, not to ours. On the other hand stand those who place women in secondary positions in all of society. They cannot do anything where they would be over men—cannot lead in business, cannot usher in church, cannot serve on church governing boards, cannot be ministers. They are to remain at home and submit to their husband's will. Is it not possible to provide a new solution, one that takes into consideration all the Bible has to say on this subject? We think so. Women should be free to be everything God meant them to be.