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# Feminism and the Ordination of Women

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Without a doubt the women's issue is one of the most contentious facing the church today. In particular the ordination of women to the ministry is proving very divisive. We are all familiar with the agonies of the Church of England over this matter, though the terms of the debate are somewhat different from that in the free churches. Conservative evangelicals in the Church of Scotland are coming under greater pressure in this area. In all churches the question of the role of women in church life is being asked. Until relatively recently it was generally clear on what side in the debate evangelicals would come down. For most evangelicals the ordination of women to the office of elder/pastor would have been a clear violation of Scripture. But this is no longer the case. In the last decade men and women with impeccable evangelical credentials have accepted the validity of such ordination. Suddenly evangelicals are divided. When we consider who we are talking about we realise that it is not a case of mainstream conservatives versus progressives on the borderline with liberalism. Walter Kaiser, Kenneth Kantzer, Roger Nicole and men like them have come to this position. What are we to make of all this? Is this simply another example of disagreement among evangelicals over a secondary issue or is it yet another example of compromise and accommodation by evangelicals with the spirit of the age?

I have been asked to assess why this breach in the evangelical ranks has occurred. But before I do that I want to define what I mean by *ordination*. By ordination I mean here the setting apart of a person to the work of an elder and in particular of a pastor/teacher in the church. I am not talking here about the peculiar Anglican variant in this debate which seems to confuse a Reformed concept of ministry with a Catholic concept of priesthood. Nor am I talking about setting people apart for other ministries in the church, such as pastoral visitation or the diaconate.

**In this article I wish to suggest five reasons for the shift of some evangelicals towards accepting the ordination of women to the ministry.**

## **1. The impact of feminism.**

One of the loudest voices in contemporary society is that of the feminist movement. Especially in the USA, feminist ideology has profoundly penetrated every aspect of society and the church is no exception. Almost all the major Protestant denominations in the USA ordain women to the ministry. Feminist theology is powerfully influential in church councils and theological seminaries. Inclusivist language in relation to God is the theological fashion. The UK lags only a little behind in this. The INDEPENDENT recently ran a series on Saturdays on feminist theology and one article dealt with the issue of language and gender in our understanding of God. If it were not for the difficulties in the Church of England the issue of ordination for many would be old hat by this time. The debate has moved on to questions about the nature of God himself. It would be surprising if evangelicalism were not affected by this. Many books by evangelical authors advocating women's ordination follow in varying degrees the

feminist agenda. None to my knowledge has advocated inclusivist language in relation to God, but some advocate inclusivist language when referring to people. The early books in the field, such as those by Jewett, Mollenkott and Scanzoni and Hardesty revealed considerable feminist influences. The emphasis was on the equality of women and their legitimate rights in the church. Any suggestion of male headship was out of the question. Later Virginia Mollenkott would go so far as to say:

I am beginning to wonder whether indeed Christianity is patriarchal to its very core.

If so, count me out. Some of us may be forced to leave Christianity in order to participate in Jesus' discipleship of equals. (Mickelsen, p 51)

That is an extreme view, but it shows how deeply feminism has influenced some.

More recent evangelical authors have been less strident. Books by women such as Gretchen Gaebelein Hull or Mary van Leuwen Stewart are calmer, gentler and less strident in tone. Indeed they make many very valid points in regard to male attitudes towards women and say many good things about the mutual responsibility of both parents in child-rearing. Nevertheless there is still a strong note on the rights of women in church life that strikes a discordant note.

A good example of this new approach is an article by Nicholas Wolterstorff in the December 1990 issue of the REFORMED JOURNAL. He seeks to answer the charge that evangelicals such as himself have been influenced by feminism. Wolterstorff argues that like any cultural development, feminism has its pluses and minuses. Christians can appreciate it and appropriate what is best critically and with discernment.

He writes:

The (Reformed) tradition never says that any movement, including feminism, is wrong through and through. It says that what is called for is a critical appropriation, a discerning critique of what is good and what is bad.

He then goes on to suggest why there is resistance to women's ordination among evangelicals: some men struggle to cling on to power; some argue biblically; some fear the loss of biblical certainty; some think women unclean. Finally he appeals to Jesus' vision of community in which there is justice for both men and women.

## **2. The changing status of women in modern society.**

No one can fail to notice the profound changes that have occurred in western society in this century. In particular the position of women has changed beyond anything that our Victorian forebears would have recognised. Virtually every profession is open to women today. More and more women are in the workplace. Home life has been made far easier for the ordinary woman. Educational opportunities for women abound. In short, there is hardly a sphere in society where women do not have a place. When this is the case we can understand why many should ask why the office of minister should be an exemption.

Here again it would be surprising if evangelical churches remained unaffected by these changes. Many churches find women wanting to do more than teach Sunday School and serve tea. Now I must admit that I do not think that this desire is a bad thing in itself. Insofar as restrictions on women's involvement in church life are merely cultural and not biblical then we can change. I believe that there are a number of areas that we need to look at if we are to use the gifts of women in our churches more effectively. Though outside the scope of this article I cannot see why women should not be admitted

to the diaconate. Changes can be made. But there is a point where the church begins to conform more to the prevailing culture than to the Scriptures and that is when we should be concerned.

### **3. The desire of some women to become pastor/teachers and in some cases the evident success of their ministries.**

In many denominations women are ordained as leaders of churches and there are a good number of evangelicals among them. This is the case in the Baptist Union. Some of the new churches (The Ichthus Fellowship is an example) as well as some of the older Pentecostal and Holiness churches recognise women in leadership. No doubt biblical justification is sought for such a practice, but I suspect that the bottom line of any rationale is basically pragmatic. Women desire to be overseers and who can deny that God has called them? Furthermore we can point to numerous examples, historical and contemporary, where God has blessed the ministry of women. Was it not William Booth who said that some of his best men were women? And the mission field abounds with women, past and present, who have done the most remarkable work for the Lord. I personally know women in ministry who are clearly evangelical and whose churches are growing. For many people this in itself justifies ordaining women to the ministry. But whatever we make of such ministries we cannot say that they give the churches authority to ordain women. We must, as in everything else, appeal to Scripture.

### **4. The divergent attitudes towards biblical authority and interpretation by those who call themselves evangelicals.**

Early on in the debate on women's ministry, in the 1970s, the issue appeared to be over the authority of Scripture. Paul K Jewett, for example, in his book *MAN: MALE AND FEMALE*, came to the conclusion that Paul was wrong to restrict the ministry of women in the churches. The better Paul was the Paul of Gal 3:28. It is not hard to see what such a view would do to one's doctrine of Scripture. In fact, Jewett's position became one of the signs of the declension of Fuller Seminary. In reaction to Jewett and others, Susan Foh, a Westminster graduate, wrote *WOMEN AND THE WORD OF GOD* (1981). The title is significant. For Mrs Foh the fundamental issue was the authority and infallibility of Scripture. Her opening chapter was an exposition of the classical evangelical doctrine.

Since then the debate has moved on. More recent writers who advocate women's ordination take great pains to affirm their conservative evangelicalism. For them the argument has shifted from one about biblical authority to one about biblical interpretation. The issue, in other words, is a *hermeneutical problem*.

The best insight into this shift is a symposium edited by Alvera Mickelsen entitled *WOMEN, AUTHORITY AND THE BIBLE* (1986). I would like to highlight several essays in this book. The first one by Robert K Johnston seeks to tackle the whole issue of the authority of Scripture in relation to this debate. What is interesting is how he uses the 'new hermeneutic' to question the traditional interpretation of the biblical passages. He criticises the attempts of some evangelicals to arrive at an objective interpretation of Scripture. The interpreter's culture, sex, prejudices, etc, are too powerful to allow any interpretation to be really objective. Using Anthony Thiselton's concept of the *two horizons* he affirms the vital importance of the second horizon, the

reader, in the interpretive process. In the debate on women's ministry this means that it is virtually impossible to arrive at a definitive interpretation of the key texts. We will simply have to live with ambiguity. Johnston recognises the danger of subjectivism in his *reader-sensitive criticism* and appeals to the church, the canon and the Holy Spirit as checks and balances.

The second essay is by Richard Longenecker. In discussing the issue of authority in male-female relationships Longenecker advocates what he calls a *developmental hermeneutic*. Basically this approach says that the teaching of the Bible on a certain topic develops progressively through biblical history. Longenecker would seek to identify the zenith in the development of an idea. So in relation to women's ministry he would identify the zenith in the attitude of Jesus towards women and a statement such as Gal 3:28. Where aspects of the NT would seem to contradict these he would see either a balancing of creational and redemptive concerns or accommodation to particular cultural circumstances. Longenecker also rather tentatively allows further development beyond Scripture as biblical principles are put into practice in new circumstances:

A development hermeneutic calls us to distinguish between (1) what the New Testament proclaims about new life in Christ and (2) its description of how that proclamation was practised in the first century - realizing that the implementation of that proclamation is portrayed in the New Testament as having been only begun and is described as being then worked out in progressive fashion. Thus we must focus our attention on the principles of the gospel message, not just on its first-century implementation. The gospel and the ethical principles that derive from it are presented in the New Testament as normative for every Christian. The way or ways in which the gospel was practiced in the first century, however, should be understood as signposts at the beginning of a journey - signposts that point out the path to be followed if we are to reapply that same gospel in our day (p 83).

The third essay by David Scholar on 1 Tim 2:9-15 is primarily exegetical, but he also discusses hermeneutical questions. He makes a number of points, but I can cite only one. With Johnston he emphasises the cultural conditioning of the text and interpreter:

The concept of genuinely objective biblical interpretation is a myth. All interpretation is socially located, individually skewed, and ecclesiastically and theologically conditioned. Nowhere is all of this more clear than on the issue of understanding biblical teaching on the place of women in the church's ministry. Generally, persons raised within holiness, pentecostal and certain Baptist traditions experienced women teaching authoritatively in the church long before they were equipped to interpret 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and never found that passage a problem. Conversely, persons raised in many Reformed traditions knew long before they were equipped to interpret 1 Timothy 2:11-12 that women were to be excluded from authoritative teaching in the church. They grew up finding the verses clear support for what they believed.

All biblical interpreters, regardless of where they now stand on the issue of women in ministry, have been deeply influenced by both the sexism and misogyny of our culture and also the currents of nineteenth-century women's rights and twentieth-century feminist movements.

Not only are interpreters conditioned. The authors of biblical texts also lived and

thought within particular historical-social settings. The biblical texts themselves are addressed to various historical settings for many different purposes. Thus, the Bible as God's word is God's communication in history, not above it or apart from it in this sense, the entire Bible consists of historically conditioned (i.e. culturally conditioned) texts (p 215).

From these examples we can see how the attitude of some evangelicals has shifted in relation to biblical authority and interpretation. **I think that such views at some points endanger the historic evangelical doctrine of Scripture.** Clark Pinnock sees this very clearly from the point of view of one who sympathises with feminist concerns. He questions whether there can be any such thing as a *biblical* feminist. He thinks that to arrive at such a position the Bible would have to be radically edited. Of course this is just what the liberals want to do. At the end of the day while evangelical feminists have some important things to say, Pinnock does not think that they can win the argument.

Nevertheless, among evangelicals there are some who do not believe that the Bible teaches appointive male leadership. They point to female leaders in Paul's own entourage, and they try to evade the traditional interpretation of various passages in the epistles. For example, they find mutual submission in Ephesians 5 and not female subordination. They seek to remove any sense of authority from the male headship to which Paul refers there. Of this line of argument, one must say that is possible and often productive of fresh insight: but in the last analysis for most people, it is unconvincing. Why? Not because the individual points made by the biblical feminists lack truth and relevance, and not (I hope) owing to sexism on the other side. Rather, the impression one gets is that Hurley has a simpler hypothesis to offer. He can accept the hierarchical texts and allow liberating insights from Jesus' attitude to modify it and does not find himself in as many awkward situations exegetically as biblical feminists seem to. This simplicity of hypothesis, coupled with the weight of traditional interpretation, gives Hurley quite an edge (p 56).

All this should make us wary of the fancy foot work being done in the name of hermeneutics. The more I read these people the more the Scriptures seem to become a nose of wax in their hands. The logic of their views is to say that in the end we can have no interpretive certainty about any teaching of Scripture. Though they would deny it, I think that the strong emphasis on the cultural conditioning of text and interpreter could as easily be used to advocate changing our views on homosexuality as on women's ordination. And there seems to be something very arbitrary about Longenecker's *development hermeneutic*. Why choose Gal 3:28 as the zenith of Paul's theology and not some other text? I would recommend reading a valuable article by John Woodhouse of Moore College, Sydney, in *EXPLORATIONS*. He questions the way the Bible is being used in this debate and argues that the cultural setting of, say, 1 Timothy 2 is essential to understanding the principle being taught in the text and its application for today:

I am suggesting that the way in which evangelicals find themselves on the side of Jewett and others in the ordination debate is by means of a hermeneutic, or use of the Bible, which (in the two examples I have cited) is an illegitimate use of the Bible. Our use of the Bible must be consistent with the nature of the Bible. The human words of the Bible are God's words. They are *all* words addressed, in the

first instance, in a specific cultural situation. But nothing in the Bible is simply cultural. It is always a cultural expression of the mind of God. We can therefore expect the *most* culturally specific injunctions to reveal God's mind to us. Not necessarily directly, but truly nonetheless. The fact that 'Adam was first formed, then Eve' (1Tim 2:13) may have consequences today that are different in detail from the consequences in the first century. But there will be consequences, and they will express the same principles in our culture as Paul's injunction expressed in his culture.

To conclude: My argument has been that divisions among evangelicals often involve different approaches to *applying* the Bible. This gives cause for both hope and alarm.

I am encouraged to think that if we can come to a common mind about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate in application of the Bible to modern questions, then we may come to agreement on many controversial issues. And it seems to me that evangelicals ought to have a clear understanding of the nature of the Bible which will provide criteria for assessing hermeneutical methods.

On the other hand I am alarmed that the issues at stake in many modern controversies (such as women's ordination) are even larger than they might at first appear. For to accept the arguments for women's ordination is to accept a hermeneutic. Once that hermeneutic has been accepted it will, if it is wrong, lead us into other, perhaps more serious, errors. (pp 13-14).

## **5 .The differing interpretations of key texts relating to the ministry of women.**

At the end of the day evangelicals have to sit down and examine the word of God. I think it needs to be said that for evangelicals such as Kaiser or Kantzer this is determinative. They may or may not be influenced by other considerations, but they appeal to the Bible in support of women's ordination and we must listen to what they have to say. Indeed we must do more than that. We must be willing to change, if they are right. In the end the Scriptures and not a tradition of interpretation must determine our practice. There are three key NT passages over which evangelicals disagree at various points. I will not be able to cover all these points but I will try to identify the principal issues. In this I draw heavily upon Sanfords Hull's appendix to Gretchen Hull's book EQUAL TO SERVE.

### **1 Corinthians 11:2-16**

- a. The meaning of the word 'head' (*kephale*) in v 3. Wayne Grudem and James Hurley argue that it means 'authority'. Pro-women's ordination advocates such as the Mickelsens argue for 'source'. Walter Liefeld advocates the idea of 'honoured' or 'prominent'. The issue at stake is the idea of hierarchy in male-female relations.
- b. Almost everyone agrees that Paul permits women to pray and prophesy. Exactly what the latter activity involved and the circumstances Paul had in mind is the source of disagreement. Most would say that Paul is speaking of the meetings of the church.

## 1 Corinthians 14:33-36

- a. What does Paul mean by 'speak' (*lalein*) in v 4? The choices are: (i) any kind of speaking (Liefeld, Grosheide); (ii) gifts of the Spirit; (iii) the examination of prophesy (Grudem, Hurley); (iv) teaching (Knight); (v) asking questions of husbands; (vi) sacred cries of joy or mourning (Kroegers).
- b. What does the 'law' mean in v 34? (i) Gen 3:16 (ii) Gen 2:21 (Knight); (iii) The OT (Hurley); (iv) Rabbinic tradition on women's silence in worship (Jewett); (v) Jewish and pagan laws on participation in worship (Liefeld).
- c. Are vv 33-35 a Corinthian slogan? Most commentators see these verses as Paul's command, but Walter Kaiser sees them as a slogan of the Corinthians that Paul contradicts in v 36.

## 1 Timothy 2:8-15

- a. Is Paul referring to wives or women in vv 11-12? Wives, say some; women in general, say Knight and Moo.
- b. What does 'quietness' mean in v 11? An attitude of learning, says Bilezikian; silence, says Moo.
- c. To whom are women to submit, v 11? Some say the teachers in the church; others, the husbands of the women; still others, men in general (Moo).
- d. What is the force of 'I do not permit' (*epitrepo*) in v 12? Moo, Knight and Hurley take it as a universal prohibition. Others emphasise the present tense of the verb and render it 'I am not presently permitting' and thereby restrict its force to local and temporal circumstances. This is an obvious key to interpreting this passage.
- e. What does Paul mean by 'to teach' (*didaskain*) in v 12? (i) teaching in the NT involved a variety of methods and individuals and had no special authority; (ii) Teaching in the NT involved authority and was restricted to particular individuals. Moo and Payne disagree over this; (iii) Paul had the teaching of false doctrine in mind (Kroeger).
- f. What is the meaning of 'to have authority' (*authentain*) in v12? (i) To possess authority (Moo, Knight, Hurley); (ii) to domineer (Payne among others); (iii) to engage in fertility rites (Kroeger).
- g. Is 'man' v 12 the object of to teach and have authority? Yes, says Moo, Knight, etc; No, says Payne, etc.
- h. Is Paul prohibiting two things or one in v 12? (i) Two distinct but related activities (Moo); (ii) one activity, 'authoritative teaching', the teaching ministry of an elder (Hurley). The view one takes on this point would determine whether women could occasionally teach but not as elders.
- i. What is the place of vv 13-14? (i) they provide the reason for Paul's prohibition; (ii) they are simple an analogy (Payne, Scholer).
- j. What is the point of v 13? (i) Because Adam was created first men have authority over women (the traditional view); (ii) the role of women should accord with the role of Eve in Eden as a help-meet.
- k. What does 'formed' (*eplasthe*) mean in v 13? Most commentators take it to mean God's creative act. But Walter Kaiser argues that it means formation, that is, instruction. This is not the common word for creation (*ktizo*).
- l. What is the point of v 14? (i) Women are more susceptible to deception (Moo); (ii) Disaster transpires when roles are reversed (Knight and Moo); (iii) Eve was

untutored and thus easily deceived. If the latter position is adopted then what Paul is doing is prohibiting untutored women teaching in church. To the extent that this situation no longer applies today, women could be allowed to teach and be elders. Another possibility I have not seen discussed is whether v 14 refers to God's judgment on women.

- m. What situation was Paul addressing here? (i) The presence of heresy (Moo, Payne, Kroegers and most others); (ii) untutored women; (iii) the rejection of traditional roles. The latter option would fit with the difficult v15.

Attempts have been made to reconcile the different passages. The particular problem is reconciling Paul's permission for women to pray and prophesy in 1 Cor 11 with his prohibitions in 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2. The more traditional interpretation would be that Paul does not forbid women to pray and prophesy because these are not exercises of authority, whereas preaching and teaching are and are therefore prohibited. The newer interpretation would see 1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2 as temporary measures for specific problems.

From all this we can see that a diversity of interpretations exist among evangelicals. Whatever we make of them I think that we would have to say that men and women *can* hold to some of these interpretations while maintaining their evangelical integrity. For example, Kaiser may be claiming too much for the word 'formed' but there is nothing inconsistent with his position and a fully inerrantist doctrine of Scripture which he upholds. If this is so, then the question of the ordination of women may have to be treated as a secondary issue over which evangelicals will differ.

Yet I still have a niggle. I cannot help but feel that the problem is more than one of interpretation. **I think that evangelicals are under a great deal of pressure to conform to the spirit of the age.** Something very fundamental is at stake. It touches the very depths of our humanity as made in the image of God. We must be very careful here and resist the temptation to compromise. By all means let us encourage women to be fully involved in the life of the church. Let's be for women's ministry. Let's get rid of practices and restrictions that demean women. But let's also not go *beyond what is written*. Here, where the pressure is great, we must stand by the word of God. Having analysed the shift in Christian thinking in this matter, J I Packer has these salutary words for modern evangelicals:

If the above analysis is right, the present day pressure to make women presbyters owes more to secular, pragmatic and social factors than to any regard for biblical authority. The active groups who push out the walls of biblical authority to make room for the practice fail to read out of Scripture any principle that directly requires such action. Future generations are likely to see their agitation as yet another attempt to baptise secular culture into Christ, as the liberal church has ever sought to do, and will, I guess, rate it as one more sign of the undiscerning worldliness of late 20th century western Christianity. (CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 11 Feb 1991 'Let's stop making women presbyters')

## Selected Reading List

### Books supporting the ordination of women

Gilbert Bilezikian, BEYOND SEX ROLES, Baker, 1986

Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, EQUAL TO SERVE, Fleming Revell, 1987, SU, 1989  
Nancy Hardesty and Liza Scanzoni, ALL WE'RE MEANT TO BE, Word, 1974  
Paul K Jewett, MAN AS MALE AND FEMALE, Eerdmans, 1975  
Alvera Mickelsen (ed), WOMEN, AUTHORITY AND THE BIBLE, IVP-USA, 1986  
Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, GRACE AND GENDER, IVP, 1990

### **Books generally opposed to the ordination of women**

Susan Foh, WOMEN AND THE WORD OF GOD, Presb & Ref, 1979  
James T Hurley, MAN & WOMAN IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE, Zondervan, 1981  
George W Knight, THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON THE ROLE RELATIONSHIP OF MEN AND WOMEN, Baker, 1977

### **Articles of interest**

Walter Kaiser, *Shared Leadership of Male Headship*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Oct 3 1986  
Kenneth Kantzer, *Proceed with Care*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Oct 3 1986  
Catherine Kroeger, *Ancient Heresies and a Strange Greek Verb*, REFORMED JOURNAL, March 1979  
Douglas Moo, *1 Tim 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance*, TRINITY JOURNAL, 1 NS (1)  
Douglas Moo, *The Interpretation of 1 Tim 2:11-15, A Rejoinder*, TRINITY JOURNAL, 2 NS (2)  
J I Packer, *Let's Stop Making Women Presbyters*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 11 Feb 1991  
Philip Payne, *Libertarian Women in Ephesus, A response to ... Moo's Article ...* TRINITY JOURNAL, 2 NS (2)  
Bruce Waltke, *Shared Leadership of Male Headship*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Oct 3 1986  
Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Between the Times*, REFORMED JOURNAL, Dec 10 1990  
John Woodhouse, *The Use of the Bible in Modern Controversies: A watershed among evangelicals?*, EXPLORATIONS 1, 1987

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Since this article was written a further significant contribution to this debate has been published. RECOVERING BIBLICAL MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD, subtitled *A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, is a 566 page symposium of 26 Chapters from 22 authors and edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem. It includes a 44 page Appendix in which Grudem answers those who have criticised his understanding of *kephale* and in another Appendix the Danvers Statement of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. It is published by Crossway with a UK price of £15.99.