

WOMEN IN THE PULPIT



**“Let your women keep silent
in the churches...”**

I CORINTHIANS 14:34-35 (NKJV)

BY DOUG TROUTEN

Pastor Olson knew what the congregation needed to hear. A week of preparation had gone into the morning’s sermon, which blended careful biblical scholarship with the hard-won lessons of personal experience. After placing a study Bible and sermon notes on the pulpit, she began to preach.

Wait a minute...*she*? *She* began to preach? If the idea of a woman as a pastor makes you do a double-take, you’re not alone. Although the ordination of women is at least a century old, it is still an unusual and controversial practice.

Opposing Views

As is the case with most controversial issues, there’s a broad spectrum of views when it comes to women in ministry, but they can be boiled down to two general camps...complementarian and egalitarian.

The complementarian view is the one most folks think of as the “conservative” or “hierarchical” view. Complementarians believe that the spiritual leadership roles of elder and pastor are reserved for men. Some complementarians believe that women should not be in positions where they teach or exercise authority over men. Ministry by complementarian women often focuses on children or other women. The leading voice for complementarianism in the U.S. is the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), based in Louisville, Kentucky.

The egalitarian view is also described as the “liberal” or even “feminist” view. Egalitarians believe that all avenues of ministry are open to men and women alike, and that gender should not prevent any otherwise qualified person from serving God in any role,

including that of pastor. The leading U.S. voice for egalitarianism is Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), based in Minneapolis.

What’s at Stake

The two sides don’t agree on much, but both argue that the role of women is perhaps the most important issue facing the church today.

“This is not an insignificant, tangential issue,” insists Mimi Haddad, president of CBE. “It’s absolutely central to what God is doing in the world.”

Haddad says the effectiveness of evangelism is affected by this issue, noting, “When men and women can’t work together in mutual submission and shared leadership it presents blockages to the gospel.”

Randy Stinson, executive director of CBMW, agrees that this is a critical issue. “I’m convinced the battle

is going to increase because so much is at stake," he says. "The ultimate harm is to the authority of the Scriptures. Are we going to let the Scriptures dictate to us how the home and church should be structured?"

The debate over the role of women will shape future debates for years to come, says Stinson. "We're all facing this daily pull away from Scripture. We're trying to fight against that. We're just highlighting this one niche where we believe it's becoming more common to pull away from Scripture, and we're encouraging people to hold the line here so there isn't a domino effect later on."

What Does the Bible Say?

People on both sides of this issue claim they're trying to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture. So what does Scripture say?

Well, it says a lot of things.

In Galatians 3:28, Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." But in I Corinthians 14: 34-35 (NKJV) he says, "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church."

In Ephesians 5:21 Paul says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." But in the next verse he adds, "Wives, submit to

time, like the command to execute teachers of false religion by stoning (Deuteronomy 13:10), or to not mix fabrics (Deuteronomy 22:11), or to not eat pork chops (Leviticus 11:7), or the command

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for slaves to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5).

It seems clear that some of what Scripture says is directed to a particular culture in a particular place and time, while other things are eternal, unchanging principles. But which is which? The answer depends on who you ask.

Cultural or Eternal?

Haddad, who has a doctorate in historical theology, says it's important to look at the cultural context of Paul's writing. She explains, "The early church heard these words from Paul: 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.' But in that culture two-thirds of the people hearing those words were probably slaves. Women were kept indoors, and were responsible to the closest male in their life.

The early church was working within a patriarchal system, but the moral teachings of the Bible broke rank with the patriarchal culture and even with the religious teachings of the Pharisees, to provide this new wine which burst the old wineskin.

Haddad says the early church was "preaching and teaching something that was offensive to Roman culture. Paul had many struggles on his hands with this new wineskin. The unity of men

and women in Christ presented problems in the culture in which he worked, so he places limits on them." Those limits, she says, were a response to specific problems, namely "chattering women," and the "chaos and confusion that comes when people experience freedom for the first time." She adds, "Throughout the history of the church, the church has had a hard time discerning the difference between the patriarchal culture of the Bible and the teachings of Scripture."

Stinson agrees that understanding the culture is important, but argues that the Bible's teachings on gender are not culture-bound. "It's the cumulative data," he notes. "When you look at patterns in the Old Testament you see patriarchal leadership. Only men can be high priests. Adam was the leader in the garden—that's why God comes looking for him. And certainly in the New Testament there are clear passages (I Corinthians 11, I Timothy 2, Ephesians 5) which make connections back to the book of Genesis. We think he's rooting the teaching on the roles of men and women in creation, not just some cultural accommodation."

Stinson continues, "With regard to ministry in the local church, we think it is the pattern of the Old and New Testament that leadership in the community of faith is reserved predominantly for men. In I Timothy 2:12 Paul tells Timothy 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man.' We would say ministry in the local church that involves teaching men, or having authority over men, should be reserved for men. That's our overarching principle."

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your husbands as to the Lord"—and there is no similar admonition directed solely to husbands.

To further complicate matters, there are a lot of things in the Bible that the church today sees as commands only for a specific place and

Did Paul overturn slavery? No, but he planted the seeds that one day would. It took us a long time to see that although slavery was part of the culture, it was not part of the moral teachings of Scripture."



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Stinson notes that the verse in Galatians 3 which says "There is neither...male nor female" has become "the window through which egalitarians view the other teachings on gender." But, he says, "What is happening in Galatians 3 is not an obliteration of gender, or that someone wouldn't have a Jewish heritage, or that there weren't still people who were slaves. What I think Paul is arguing is that in Christ there is no distinction before God. All are equal heirs in the kingdom. He's making a statement of equality in Christ. We affirm the fact that slaves and free, Jews and Greeks will receive the same inheritance in Christ. But we don't think this obliterates the clear distinctions that Paul mentions later on. Paul also says 'wives, submit to your husbands.' They fit together. It's equality in Christ but a difference in role and function that doesn't obliterate that equality."

What's Happening Now?

Where Stinson sees dangerous compromise of biblical teachings, Haddad sees improved understanding of timeless truth.

"It's a reformist movement," says

Like any other reform, says Haddad, it won't be easy. "Consider how the church reformed itself on the issue of slavery. People lost their lives. The U.S. fought a bloody Civil War and Great Britain emptied its treasury to deconstruct the institution of slavery. There's going to be anger and hostility as the Holy Spirit cleans house on the issue of gender. Slaves were an unpaid social service to the world,

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and in many places women are too."

Stinson sees that kind of talk as evidence that the current debate has its roots in the modern feminist movement, not in an improved understanding of Scripture. "From our perspective the current debates about women in ministry in the evangelical community are the result of the influence of secular feminism on the church," he says. "We would argue that this

This is countercultural, but when a church or individual decides to do something that the Bible has clearly said not to do it undermines the authority of Scripture and makes it easier to accommodate other things the culture will throw at us down the road."

Haddad acknowledges a feminist influence—but only to a point. "The first wave of feminists in this country were deeply biblical people," she notes. "I'm thinking of A.J. Gordon, Katharine Bushnell, Josephine Butler, Moody and Finney—all the great revivalists of the 1800s. There was a great missionary impulse, and people—men and women alike—flooded the mission field, because they began to see in Scripture this notion of gift-based ministry. Women were in Bible colleges in unprecedented

numbers. This was the first wave of feminists.

Our moorings are biblical and they go back to the golden era of missions. Eventually, after World War I and II, the feminist movement became detached from its biblical moorings, and they put their feminist ideals above the Scripture, and that is the essence of radical feminism today. The church has every reason to be nervous about that. But that doesn't mean that we can't accept the first wave of feminism which taught that men and women are equal in the sight of God.

We are the last stop for many feminists who wonder if God is truly a respecter of all persons. We try to help women who are ready to give up on Christianity see that although the church has been mistaken at times, God is ready to embrace them and use their gifts."

Dr. Mimi Haddad, president of Christians for Biblical Equality

Haddad. "It's a reform that God is bringing to the church: deeply biblical, and articulated in scholarly and popular terms. We are seeing that we have not read the Bible thoroughly and completely on this issue."

wasn't an issue until the rise of secular feminism in the United States."

Stinson adds, "The Bible is very clear on the equality between men and women, but it's also clear on the difference in role and function.

Middle Ground?

Both sides of this debate seem to be firmly entrenched. Is there hope

of resolution? If there is, it might look like the middle ground being staked out by Dr. Gerry Breshears, professor of theology at Western Seminary in Oregon. In a paper presented recently to the Evangelical Theological Society, Breshears identified the positions taken by egalitarians and complementarians, extreme views on either side of the debate, and a middle-of-the-road position.

"I think it's going in two directions," he explains. "One group is the CBE group who are trying to bring a complete equality in the church, where gender differences make no significant difference in who does what. The thing they're fighting is people who are into feminist lesbian agenda, which evangelicals are not going to buy into. That's a real problem, because they're getting branded as feminists and lesbians and Wiccans."

He continues, "The other group, the CBMW group, are trying to say that women should not be pastors, and many of them are saying that men should always be in authority and women should never teach men. It's a hardening of position. The battle they're fighting is the people who see women as lesser beings, and the kind of Muslim picture where women are here to serve men. They're being caricatured in that way."

Breshears agrees with both CBE and CBMW on one thing. "What's at stake is the authority of Scripture," he says. "Everybody agrees that this is really the issue." But Breshears sees room for improvement on both sides. "CBE is heard as dismissing every Scriptural limitation on women with hermeneutical gymnastics," he says. "And CBMW is heard dismissing the freedom statements on women, camping on two verses and making that everything."

The solution, he says, is to be open to a third view. "By breaking it into two positions you force a polarization that need not be there," he says. "If you bring it down to one or two it forces you to mess with Scripture in ways that you don't need to."

So what does Breshears believe? "The position that I hold, which is fairly widely held in the evangelical world, is that while eldership is reserved for males, that's not the first statement I make," he says. "The first statement I make is that women are encouraged to fill any ministry position open to non-elders."

He continues, "Women are told to submit—and of course that's an emotionally charged word. Husbands are never told to submit to their wives. Mutual submission? In my judgment you can't make that happen from Scripture. You can make shared ministry happen, and one of my gripes against CBMW is they aren't as pro-woman as they could be."

Neither the complementarians nor the egalitarians are quick to embrace Breshears—so perhaps he's onto something. And he believes it's possible for churches to have a reasoned, productive discussion on this issue.

"The first thing I would do is sit down and look at the major passages and ask, 'What does it actually say?' Don't look for all the explosions—let those go for the moment. Everybody can agree that in I Corinthians 11 both men and women pray and prophesy. It's surprising if you stay away from the fights how much we agree on. Now we're working together."

He continues, "The next step is to look at not two views but at least three views. Ask which view accounts for the most biblical data with the fewest difficulties. What typically happens is people come in with their position and their favorite verse, and they begin clubbing each other. It just turns into a fight."

Breshears concludes, "When we get done, we need to say that we agree on a lot of things, and there are things we don't agree on, but we can still be friends." □

Doug Trouten is the Executive Director of the Evangelical Press Association. He and his wife Lis live in Minnesota.

FOR FURTHER READING

Confused about the role of women in the church? You're not alone. Fortunately, there are many books available to help you dig into the topic. Here are a few to start with:

Books which compare and contrast complementarian and egalitarian views:

Two Views on Women in Ministry, edited by James Beck (Zondervan, 2005)

Women in Ministry: Four Views, edited by Bonnidell Clouse and Robert G. Clouse (InterVarsity Press, 1989)

Complementarian Books

Does Christianity Squash Women? A Christian Looks at Womanhood, by Rebecca Jones (B&H Publishing Group, 2005)

Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions, by Wayne Grudem (Multnomah, 2004)

Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood, edited by Wayne Grudem (Crossway Books, 2002)

Different by Design: Discovering God's Will for Today's Man and Woman, by John MacArthur, Jr. (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1994)

Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Crossway Books, 1991)

Egalitarian Books

All God's People: An Exploration of the Call of Women to Pastoral Ministry, by John E. Phelan, Jr. (Covenant Publications, 2005)

Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy, Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, general editors, with Gordon D. Fee, contributing editor (InterVarsity, 2004)

10 Lies the Church Tells Women: How the Bible Has Been Misused to Keep Women in Spiritual Bondage, by J. Lee Grady (Charisma House, 2000)

Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Leadership, Ministry, and Missions, by Loren Cunningham and David J. Hamilton with Janice Rogers (YWAM Publishing, 2000)

Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in the Family, by Gilbert Bilezikian (Baker, 1985; new ed. forthcoming)