

Women's Roles and Work in the New Testament Churches

by Leon King

Denominational leaders, pastors, para-church organization organizers, and others involved in the work of the churches or things related to the churches constantly pressured by a society bent on the "equality of men and women." Some churches which seemed like they would never succumb to social pressures are now "ordaining women into the ministry." While the men sit back on their proverbial stools-of-do-nothing, the women are taking the lead. The women are vaulting themselves (or being vaulted) by people who deny the teaching of the Scriptures. Since the Scriptures are our standard of judgment, then it behooves us to mind our actions with regard to all the commands and precepts of our Lord. Let the potsherd of the earth strive with one another in this modern social movement, but let not the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ cave in to such practices.

During the past years, I have studied anew the New Testament principles regarding the work of women in the days of the Lord Jesus and in the beginnings of the New Testament Churches. I find there is a complete unity of teaching about the role of women in the churches. The pattern was set in the days of our Lord Jesus Christ. We need to review these things and understand just what purpose the Lord has in mind for Godly women. Let us notice some passages:

Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey. And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James <the son> of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas <the brother> of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and

*supplication, **with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus,** and with his brethren. -- Acts 1:12-14.*

This passage teaches us that the women met with the church after the Lord ascended. They were waiting for the baptism of the Holy Ghost for power to do their work. That baptism would come on the church corporately and sovereignly on the day of Pentecost. There is absolutely no indication that any of the women took any kind of leadership role in the church, but simply waited with the others for the promise of the Father.

*And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, **help those women which laboured with me in the gospel,** with Clement also, and <with> other my fellowlabourers, whose names <are> in the book of life. -- Philippians 4:3.*

This passage teaches us that there were women who labored with Paul in the gospel. In what capacity are we to imagine they labored? We know the godly women in the days of our Lord Jesus ministered to him in their substance, I would suggest these women did no differently. There is no indication they were preachers or leaders in any way. They were supporters, but their work was just as important as Paul's work. They worked in the place God had ordained for them to work.

I have counted thirty-seven different women who are named in the New Testament. This list includes believers and unbelievers. Some of those named are women who lived in Old Testament times and referred to by the New Testament writers. The list includes Anna, Apphia, Bernice, Candace, Chloe, Damaris, Dorcas (Tabitha), Drusilla, Elisabeth, Eunice, Euodias, Eve, Herodias, Joanna, Julia, Lois, Lydia, Martha, Mary (mother of Jesus), Mary Magdalene, Mary (mother of James & Joses), Mary (mother of John Mark), Mary (sister of Martha & Lazarus), Mary (helper of the Apostle Paul), Persis, Phebe, Prisca (Priscilla), Rahab, Rhoda, Ruth, Salome, Sapphira, Susanna, Syntyche, Tryphena, and Tryphosa.

All of these women named are not necessarily godly women. In fact, some of them are evil. I have mentioned their names so that everyone is included. With most of those named, there is really nothing to indicate exactly what they may have done with respect to the Lord's work. For doctrinal purposes, we must ascertain what is revealed in Scripture about those we read about to rightly understand God's purpose.

There is much wrong thinking so far as the Bible is concerned about the roles and work of women in the New Testament church. We would be more than blind not to understand these principles. None of these women were Apostles. None were prophets. None were Bishops or Pastors. None were deacons - at least in the office as indicated in 1 Timothy 3. If you want to call Phoebe a deaconess; I suggest she was the wife of a deacon. There is nothing in Scripture to indicate they took the lead in any function of the New Testament Church. But, let us notice what they did and this will lead us to understand God's will for women in the church.

I. The believing women ministered to the Lord Jesus Christ during his personal ministry.

And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.
-- Luke 8:3..

And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children. -- Matthew 27:55-56.

There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; (Who also, when he was in Galilee, followed

him, and ministered unto him;) and many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem. -- Mark 15:40-41.

II. The women continued to serve the Lord in supporting ministry after his death.

*And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. **And they returned, and prepared spices and ointments;** and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment. -- Luke 23:55-56.*

III. The women spoke with the men privately and relayed information.

It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary <the mother> of James, and other <women that were> with them, which told these things unto the apostles. --Luke 24:10. (This refers to the fact of the resurrection.)

IV. The women went to prison for their faith and church work.

*As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men **and women** committed <them> to prison. -- Acts 8:3.*

V. Scattered, the women prayed together (no men indicated as being present).

*And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake **unto the women** which resorted <thither>. -- Acts 16:13.*

VI. We need to note these things:

1. No women were named among the apostles (the twelve) nor the other seventy persons sent out.

2. No woman can Scripturally be chosen to be a Bishop or Deacon.

This <is> a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. Likewise <must> the deacons <be> grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being <found> blameless. Even so <must their> wives <be> grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. -- 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not

given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. -- Titus 1:5-9.

3. Neither male nor female, bond nor free?

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye <be> Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." -- Galatians 3:27-29.

These verses do not negate the clear commands of Scripture concerning the roles to be followed by men, women, children, masters, and servants revealed in other places of the New Testament. To array the Scriptures against one another is to wrongly divide them.

4. Women are forbidden to speak in the assembly in the New Testament.

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but <they are commanded> to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. -- 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then

Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety. --1 Timothy 2:9-15.

5. Women who have questions are told to ask their husbands at home.

And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. -- 1 Corinthians 14:35.

6. Women are instructed to teach other women and children.

The aged women likewise, that <they be> in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, <To be> discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. -- Titus 2:3-5.

7. Women are instructed to be obedient to their own husbands.

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so <let> the wives <be> to their own husbands in every thing. -- Ephesians 5:22-24.

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. -- Colossians 3:18.

Likewise, ye wives, <be> in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the

conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation <coupled> with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward <adorning> of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But <let it be> the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, <even the ornament> of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement. -- 1 Peter 3:1-6.

8. Younger women should marry, bear children, guide the house, etc.

I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. -- 1 Timothy 5:14.

A Final Observation.

Christian Women who pursue the Scriptural teaching to fulfill their roles in the home and private life will find great contradiction in this generation. That is becoming more and more true within the realm of those who profess Christianity. We see numbers of women being ordained as Pastors and Deacons. Many teach over men. Some are choir directors. Some are "deaconesses." My wife and I were in a church several years ago where one of the "board" members approached her about becoming a "deaconess." I knew we had trouble when that happened. Many women lead in other capacities. This is all outside God's prescribed order. Such things are totally unscriptural. Social pressure and trends of the world should never sway the position of the Lord's churches concerning this or other matters.

As believer-priests, all Godly women need to praise and worship the Lord in their church. For them to take a leadership role or even to speak out in

the assembly is to disobey the commands of the Lord. (See 1 Corinthians 14:37)

Godly women show obedience when they take a supporting role in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the case of the woman created for the man as a fitting helper, so it is in the church. Womens' Missionary Societies, Auxillaries, and other para-church womens' organizations were founded to foster women speaking and encourage them to do so. Such organizations are unscriptural. Nothing like that is ever seen in the New Testament.

Interestingly, a woman came to me several years ago while our church was affiliated with the Baptist Missionary Association of America (BMAA). We had a Women's Missionary Auxillary because the BMAA promoted the same. At the time, I was ignorant of the Bible teachings on this subject. This sister said to me, "Pastor, this organization is unscriptural; there's nothing like that in the Bible." With those words, she walked away on her husband's arm leaving me standing with my mouth open and nothing to say. We thought we had to have a Women's Missionary Auxillary because other churches that fellowshipped with the BMAA had one.. The WMA was a problem - it was always a problem. I was relieved when it was finally dissolved.

We need to start early in life with our young ladies to develop in them a *"meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price."* The woman with this kind of spirit is a priceless wife and mother. She fulfils her duties in the home and in a supporting role in the church. Her opposite is found in the book of Proverbs. Instead of having a meek and quiet spirit, *"She is loud and stubborn; her feet abide not in her house: Now is she without, now in the streets, and lieth in wait at every corner."* -- Proverbs 7:11-12.

Today's worldly women seek self-assertion, equal rights, and upward mobility. This kind of attitude is pushed in secular education, in the mass

media, and the whole culture. While many women have the will and intellectual capacity to do as much as (and often more than) men in those areas, the *"meek and quiet spirit"* is missing. Alas, it is also true of many women in the New Testament Churches.

So, what do we encourage our women to do in ministry?

Let us promote our women as virtuous women described in Proverbs 31:10-31. Let us develop in our daughters *"a meek and quiet spirit."* Let us teach them to yield the leadership and public role to the man. Let us teach them to be *"keepers at home."* Let us teach them they are given to man as his completer. Together, a man and his wife represent the picture of Jesus and the church. He is the head; the church is his body. The wife is to the man *"bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh."* Consequently, what ever the ministry of the man in the church, his wife is given to help in that work. She is to complement the work he does. Does the woman have spiritual gifts? Very definitely, she does. She must exercise that gift under the guidelines given in scripture.

The most learning along this line and the most important comes from the deportment of the home. The children learn more incidentally than they learn in a class setting. The demeanor of the home - the way the parents relate to one another - the manner in which they fulfill their God-given roles speaks loudly and consistently in the heart of the young person. Children who see their Dad take the lead - and their Mom follow his leadership will have gone a long way in learning by their example. Furthermore, their schooling should continue to reinforce this teaching by example.

If children are in a church school environment, these principles can be demonstrated and reinforced. For example, we require all our students to memorize scripture. They memorize a new one of at least ten verses each month. They must recite it to a learning center supervisor to be sure it has been properly memorized. We require the boys to recite it to the supervisor, then to the student body. This prepares them for public service. The young

ladies do not recite the scripture before the student body. Our girls are required to do creative writing. Creative writing focuses on songs, poetry, and short stories. The boys are required to take the speech course and learn to speak publicly. We recognize that not all are going to be orators, but they will be trained for public speaking. This encourages their public participation in the church. It encourages them to lead in prayer - to lead singing - to speak to issues - to speak words of encouragement to their fellows. As the girls learn to follow the leadership of the boys, they develop a meek and quiet spirit.

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