

# Women's Role in the Church

## I. Introduction

- A. A generation is now living that knows only a feminist's world. Gender equality in every aspect of life is a basic mantra of our culture. It is not only pictured in every television sitcom and drama as the norm, it is codified in the laws of our land. The very idea that female is to be subject to male in any way is regarded as antiquated. "Only fundamentalist Christians believe in such backward ideas!"
- B. That statement may well be accurate. I am convinced the Biblical teaching on the roles of male and female are completely out of step with modern culture's beliefs and practices. I don't think I have to spend a lot of time here tonight discussing how far removed we, as NT Christians, are from mainstream thinking on the role of women in the culture.
- C. Culture influences Christians. And feminism is influencing Christian thought. Its influence is great enough that those planning this lectureship on the church included this topic: Women's role in the church.
- D. I think we will profit from most tonight is:
  1. Review from the first lesson what many who claim to follow Christ are teaching to accommodate modern feminist thought, and then:
  2. Practically examine our own view of the woman's role in the church and put it in a true biblical perspective. A lot of Christians who want to do right struggle with biblical teaching on this topic. I want us to see there is no need for any Christian woman to feel oppressed in her role in the Lord's church.
- E. Our discussion will be a biblically rooted discussion, respected the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Any other basis for this discussion would be purely philosophical and one idea would be as good as another. We must recognize the Bible as the final authority in this matter.
- F. Review some background.
  1. The feminist movement has succeeded in changing the general view of society on the role of women in the workplace, in the home and in the general culture. My generation has observed an almost 180 degree shift in the view of women's roles. From the glorified and honored role of the stay at home mom of the 1950's we now see the "truly fulfilled woman" as one who is not bound by her apron strings and is free to find real fulfillment in her own career. Home and family responsibilities are viewed as secondary responsibilities that can and even should be assigned to hired help or daycare workers. The most radical of feminists regard marriage itself as a cruel slavery devised by the male to control the female and that true liberation of the woman will not be accomplished until marriage is removed from the culture and child-rearing is turned over to the state.
    - i. It should be noted that there has been a backlash, even among women, against such radical views of feminism (e.g. The Feminist Mistake, by Marie Clair, et al). Time has shown the folly of believing a woman can have a full career and a full home life. Choices have to be made, sacrifices are made either in the career or in the home. You can't do both. The result is a more moderate view of feminism in general but one that is, nonetheless, at odds with NT Christianity.
  2. As we examine a woman's role in the church, it is against the background of sweeping change in our culture regarding women's roles and the consequent effect upon views Christians hold concerning this matter. We must address these issues. They are not going to go away. If you are a part of a church that is converting people out of the world then you know that this is a significant issue to be addressed. It isn't just being introduced into the

church by our more liberal brethren. It is being introduced by these converts out of the world who often experience culture shock when taught God's truths on these matters.

## II. Modern interpretations of key passages.

- A. Let's quickly review some points from the first lesson in this series.
- B. If someone wants the church to embrace the basic principles of modern feminist thought, then they must grapple with certain key passages and principles in the Bible. Our discussion tonight is not of the role of women in general but, more specifically, the role of women in the church. I want us to direct our thoughts more to that specific topic. But we do need to see this topic against the backdrop of the overall feminist interpretation of scripture.
- C. Many so-called Christian feminists teach that subjection of the woman may have been a consequence of the fall of Eve (Gen. 3:16) but that subjection was done away with in Christ and now all are equal before God. After all Paul said there is "neither male or female" in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Let's begin with those passages.
- D. First are the "egalitarian" passages (egalitarian refers to human equality in all relationships - you can study this topic without seeing this term repeatedly). These passages indicate an equality that exists in Christ.
  1. Joint-heirs, Rom. 8:17; a new creation, 2nd Cor. 5:17; neither male nor female, Gal. 3:28.
  2. The passages are all talking about our redemption in Christ. They are not discussing male-female relationships or roles. They are pointing out that God makes no distinction when it comes to salvation.
- E. Next are the "Headship/submission" passages. These are the passages that sure seem to clearly indicate that the male is placed in a position of leadership and headship, especially in the church and in the home.
  1. 1st Cor. 11:2-16, "head of every woman is the man"; Eph. 5:22-33, "husband in the head of the wife"; 1st Cor. 14:34-36, "women keep silence in the churches...but let them be in subjection"; 1st Tim. 2:11-16, "I permit not a woman to teach or have dominion over a man."
    - i. Feminist argumentation on these passages often centers in redefining the word "head" to mean "source." Although the term is on rare occasions so interpreted, it is impossible to give it that meaning in these passages that are so clearly discussing headship and submission.
    - ii. Attempts are also made to limit certain passages to a specific circumstance being discussed in the context, i.e., veils in 1st century Corinth, etc. Such reasoning overlooks that what is being taught, in 1st Cor. 11 for example, is an enduring principle of which the covering is but one application. Other examples of poor textual analysis could be given but they only further illustrate the same point - that feminist exposition of scripture is really, really weak.
  2. The "Biblical" feminist calls these passages "hard passages." They reason that these verses have difficult concepts in them and one cannot be too strict in their interpretation of these passages. For example, since there are differing views on 1st Cor. 11 concerning what is meant by the covering, or what is meant by "because of the angels" in vs. 10, we shouldn't be dogmatic in using this passage to teach submission of the woman to the man.
    - i. How convenient. If you don't want to follow what a particular chapter in the Bible says, then find some phrase in that chapter brethren differ over. Since brethren differ over that phrase you have to throw out the whole chapter's teaching. Jack Cottrell calls this the fallacy of believing that "incomplete knowledge is false knowledge." In other words if you don't understand it all perfectly then you don't know any of it at all! He rightly points out that such argumentation is not only unreasonable but also devastating to the whole idea

of biblical understanding. (It reminds me of the reasoning Karl Ketcherside, Leroy Garrett, et. al. used to use to justify dropping everything but the most fundamental belief in Jesus as a test of fellowship, saying that beyond that you just can't be sure of the truth.)

- ii. These passages are "hard passages" for the feminists simply because they clearly say the opposite of what they want them to say. (Cf. Luther's struggle with James 2; Baptists struggle with 1 Peter 3:21). Sound exposition of these passages is not hard to someone committed to accepting what the Bible says and not to trying to eisegete a personal bias into these passages.
- iii. We must remember that the Bible doesn't always say what we want it to say. Some things may go against what we want but either God's Revealed Will is unchanging and final or it isn't.

### III. Implications for women's roles in the church.

- A. Some see this as a true challenge to NT teaching on the church.
  1. Current controversies among even conservative brethren include such matters of women serving as deacons, women waiting on the Lord's table, serving as ushers, participating in business meetings.
  2. More liberal churches of Christ are already dealing with women in the pulpit, teaching mixed classes and even serving as elders.
  3. Really, the answer to most of these matters is not that hard to see. But what I want us to do is to look at how we view the whole matter of the work of the church. I believe the problem of dissatisfaction with women's roles in the church may be rooted in our misunderstanding of the local church.
- B. What is the answer to this question - "What can a woman do in the local church?"
- C. The answer to that question depends greatly on what you see as "church work."
  1. What is the local church - an organization or a relationship?
    - i. You say its both. I could accept that but how do you *think* of the local church? Which phrase comes into you mind first when you think of the local church - "organized body" or "family?" If you are going to discuss the work of the local church, which term would you begin with to describe the local church? How you answer that probably will say a lot about how you view the "work of the local church."
  2. Our view of "church work" is influenced by an institutional concept. We claim to stand opposed to "institutionalism" yet many of us practice a form of it in our view of the local church and its work.
    - i. When we think local church we think, "Elders, deacons, Sunday and Wednesday services.
    - ii. Men believe they participate in the work of the local church by being elders, deacons, bible class teachers, leading in public prayer and waiting on the table. Whether we want to admit it or not we think of the work of the local church as being: 1)what happens in the local assembly and; 2)what the church's money is spent for. The result is we begin to think that if I am not doing anything in the public assemblies then I am not involved in the local work. (I have heard it said, "Congregations over 200 are a burying ground for talent.")
      - a. And the consequence of that that line of thinking is women are almost totally prohibited from the local church's work. Other than teaching children's classes, singing along with the male leader in the public worship and giving of their means if they have an income, they are not able to participate in the "work of the church."

- iii. Brethren that is a very institutional concept of the local church and is harmful. Let me explain.
- D. What is the local church?
1. A group of Christians who band together in a local community. People committed to serving God and supporting one another.
  2. How many hours a week are they Christians? How many hours a week are they members of the local church? Now, how many hours do the members of a local church spend assembled? How many hours a week can each Christian do the Lord's work as a part of His body?
    - i. My point is this. We have almost come to think that the only time we are a part of the church is when we are assembled. And that the only things we can do as a part of the local church is what we do in our public assemblies.
      - a. The Jerusalem church had 1000's of members. Can you imagine the complaints the apostles must have gotten from men in Jerusalem about not getting to lead the opening prayer at the Sunday morning service often enough? That wasn't the kind of problem that arose in the Jerusalem (See Acts 6). And I think it is because they had a clearer view of what it meant to be a worker in the Lord's kingdom.
  3. The Bible teaches us that what Christianity centers in is our daily walk with God. Every waking moment we belong to Him and we serve Him. 95% of Biblical instruction is to the individual and what he does outside the assemblies, not in them. When we begin to think that serving God is mainly about our role in the local church organization and public worship, we have missed the emphasis of the New Testament.
    - i. Jesus did not mention the local church in the Sermon on the Mount. When he laid the foundation for who His people would be he talked about their daily discipleship.
  4. Don't misunderstand me. I am not denigrating the local church or the role of elders, deacons, evangelists and teachers. They are biblically ordained roles (Eph. 4:11ff) and are vital. However, 95% of all Christians, male and female, will most likely never serve in any of those roles! Does that mean they are second class Christians or have diminished roles in serving God? Absolutely not! They have all they can do to serve God in their daily walk - in the 164 hours a week they spend outside of the public assemblies!
    - i. Just because women may not be authorized to serve as elder or deacons or to teach mixed public classes doesn't mean they are delegated to a minor role in the Lord's kingdom. Far from it. They share in some of the most important responsibilities in the kingdom - teaching, evangelizing, serving, exhorting, correcting, living exemplary lives, establishing a Christian marriage and home.
    - ii. Surely we can see that is what being a Christian is all about and be about the Lord's work daily.

#### **IV. What we must avoid:**

- A. Thinking that leadership in a local church is about power. "Eldering" is not about power, its about service. When we begin to think that what is important in the local church is the "hierarchy" we are in trouble. Then everybody wants to be a part of the "hierarchy." Actually if you understand the structure of the local church you will know that it doesn't have a "hierarchy" in the denominational sense of the term.
- B. Thinking that what we do in the local assembly is all we do as a part of the church.
- C. Thinking the only important work done in the local church is done by elders and deacons and preachers.

1. The most important work done by a local church is what it does as individuals in their daily walk with God and before the world.
2. When we begin to think like that, then we can see that the role of women in the local church is large enough to keep them all busy for the Lord 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And the same can be said of all the men.
3. Ladies, you want to be active in the local church? Then live for Jesus everyday - study God's Word diligently, teach your neighbors and friends, older ladies teach the younger ones (Titus 2) do good to all around you, especially the household of God (Gal. 6:10), encourage your brethren daily (Heb. 3:13); pray for one another daily (1 Thess 5:17), raise godly children, be a true help to your mate. The list is endless for a woman in the Lord's vineyard.

## **V. Conclusion**

- A. Ladies - don't get caught up in the feminist agenda thinking fulfillment will be yours only if you can do everything a man does. I certainly can't do everything a woman does. Fulfillment can be found in doing the Lord's work everyday from the heart.
- B. List of things woman can do - Pam's response.
- C. Let's remember that whether man or woman, there is plenty to do in the Kingdom of the Lord. He needs workers - 7 days a week - and let's be busy doing the work of the kingdom, daily.