

The Role of Women in the Church

This short study has been written in the hope that its readers will be able to acknowledge that some Christadelphian sisters owe their existence more to Victorian tradition/traditions regarding our than to clear Bible teaching.

I find it difficult to grasp how a Bible-based community can oppose godly sisters in Christ participating in public prayer and praise to our Heavenly Father and our Saviour Jesus Christ, when we assemble together for worship.

Bible truth is dynamic not static. May we be guided by the Holy Spirit into the paths of truth and righteousness, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

(All Bible quotations are from the NIV.)

How do we interpret Scripture?

Everything that is written reflects the background of the writer. It is not possible for a writer to be detached from his or her surroundings and past life. Hence, we cannot avoid interpreting even Scripture, the word of God, in the light of context, time, situation and environment. As Jesus shows in the Sermon on the Mount, the whole essence of the edicts of God is the meaning which lies beneath the surface. Thus the whole of the Law of Moses was given to teach people the right approach to God: *Love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself*. The real meaning was the principle that lay beneath the surface of the Law - care, compassion, mercy and humility, as the prophet Hosea proclaimed. But the Jews of Jesus' day had turned the Law into a system of legal restrictions - sabbath keeping, food prohibitions and rejection of the Gentiles.

The belief in treating the letter of the Law as absolute is the characteristic of fundamentalism, which accepts as unquestionable any edict of Scripture without regard to context, situation or contemporary conditions.

To Old Testament believers, the keeping of the Law was meant to be joyful, but the system of rites and ordinances was interpreted in such a rigid way that it became irksome. Jesus when he came, freed up the legalism and proclaimed release from the Law (since it was impossible to keep) and proclaimed a reign of freedom and grace. Following his ascension and the establishment of the 1st century church, only two practices were universally accepted: baptism into Christ, and the remembrance of his death in the breaking of bread.

In the Old Testament there was a hierarchical system of priesthood: a High Priest and individual priests who ruled over the people of Israel, and who interpreted the tenets of the Law. The order of the day was that all women and most men were excluded from priestly service. Women, however, could play a prominent part, not only in the home (Proverbs 31:10-31) but were able to serve God in other ways. Deborah was a judge and Huldah a prophetess, both with the approval of God. That these women were few compared to men is not surprising in a male-dominated world where physical strength was important for outside tasks (ploughing, going to war) and where women were repeatedly pregnant and, inevitably, carers of children.

In the New Testament, apostles were initially appointed by Jesus to go forth and preach the gospel of the kingdom of God. The apostles were men, since it would have been totally inappropriate for unescorted women to have gone from town to town preaching. But during his ministry women were recruited to his cause: *Jesus travelled about ... proclaiming the good news*

of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) ... Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means (Luke 8:1-3). Though Jesus did not get them to preach, his attitude to women is significant. Other rabbis of his time put women down but Jesus never does. He always speaks to women with respect. He also uses them to spread his message e.g. the woman at the well, the women at the tomb - *Go tell my brothers*.

The organisation of the early church.

The twelve apostles were the leaders, and after Jesus' ascension into heaven, as converts grew in number and individual churches were formed, there had to be order and structure in worship, so a framework was laid down. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (written about AD 53) we read: *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues* (1 Corinthians 12:27). As the church advanced, spectacular gifts of the Spirit, such as miracles, healing and speaking in tongues seemed to diminish.

In the letter to the Ephesians (written around AD 60/62) we are told: *It was he [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (Ephesians 4:11). The word translated 'pastor' is *poimen* which means 'a shepherd', one who tends his flock, in this case the flock of God. Jesus too was called a Shepherd. The word 'teacher', Greek *didaskalos* is 'one who instructs'.

Those in prominent positions were to expound and explain the principles of Christianity, to make clear the meaning of Scripture, and to instruct in the moral duties of the spiritual life. Above all, they were to bring men and women to Jesus, the one who can change lives and bring joy and peace in daily living.

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul (writing about AD 60/62) addresses the congregation in this way: *To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers (KJV bishops) and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* (Philippians 1:1).

Let us pick up on the name 'overseer', Greek *episkopos*. It means something like 'supervisor', 'one who watches over' in a caring sense, not in the sense of the KJV translation 'bishop', with its overtones of lordship. The name 'deacon', Greek *diakonos*, means 'one who serves'.

The epistle to Titus (written about AD 65) speaks of 'eldership' as being a church office: *The reason I left you [Titus] in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient ...* (Titus 1:5,6). An elder must be a man of impeccable conduct. The Greek word for 'elder' is *presbuteros* meaning 'an older man', a man of maturity, with sufficient experience to watch over the assembly of believers for which he was responsible. Verse 7 continues: *Since an overseer (episkopos) is entrusted with God's work he must be blameless - not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.*

We will have noticed, from verses 5 and 7, that the terms 'elder' (*presbuteros*) and 'overseer' (*episkopos*) are interchangeable. An elder or overseer in the church of God had to be fit to watch over and care for the assembly of believers.

To sum up, though leadership continued to be predominantly male, there are no indications of the exclusion of women. In the modern world, where women participate in all walks of life, it is a hindrance to the gospel to use out-of-context passages to restrict women's service to God.

In fact, some ecclesial duties were (and still are) more fitting for women than for men to carry out, such as the instruction of young females: Older women (*presbutides*, the female equivalent of *presbuteros*) to train the younger women to love their husbands and their children (Titus 2:3,4); and to contribute to the special needs of others, exemplified in Dorcas, who was always doing good and helping the poor (Acts 9:36),

The place of women

Two passages of Scripture to look at specifically are:

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head - it is just as though her head was shorn (1 Corinthians 11:4,5).

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34,35). 'Remain silent' in Greek is *sigao* meaning 'keep quiet', 'refrain from speaking'.

[It is often forgotten that certain men, as well as the women referred to above, were also told by the apostle Paul to 'stop speaking' in the ecclesia - since they were noisily babbling in tongues and upsetting the worship: If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God (1 Corinthians 14:28). 'Keep quiet' is again *sigao*, translated 'remain silent' in verse 34.]

There is also the 'be silent' passage in the 1st letter to Timothy: I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women (likewise when they pray) to dress modestly appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and fall submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve (1 Timothy 2:8-15). The new-found freedom that women (wives) were given was creating stress in fellowship. From the context, this would appear to be a man and wife situation; the wife should not domineer her husband in his public service in the church. Note 'quietness' and 'silent' are the same Greek word *hesuchia*. This does not mean 'keep your mouth shut' but something like 'do not chatter' or 'do not gossip'. In 2 Thessalonians 3:12 it is translated 'settle down'. This instruction by Paul does not forbid a woman to pray or preach (prophecy) in church, but is a reminder of good behaviour and manners.

Tom Wright points out that the background to Paul's words is that he was writing to Timothy at Ephesus. Now, Ephesus was a city of pagan religion, dominated by the temple of Artemis (KJV Diana), the female deity whose priests were all women. They had total authority over the worship and ruled over the men. To counteract any similar baleful influence from infiltrating the church, Paul tells the sisters in Christ that they must not attempt to seize control over the

Christian worship or to dominate the brothers. Within that context and situation, they were not to teach, rather they must exercise self-control and show humility in their service to God.

Returning to, and taking 1 Corinthians 11:4, 5 at face value, it is obvious that women participated in public worship in the Christian church at Corinth. They prayed and prophesied in the same way as the men did. William Barclay translates 'prays or prophesies' as 'prays or preaches'. He thinks it means 'publicly expound' rather than 'foretelling the future'. As the Anglican scholar Bishop Lightfoot put it: 'women as well as men spoke to edification and exhortation and comfort'. The verb 'to prophesy', Greek *propheteuo* (*pro* - 'forth', *phemi* - 'to speak'), can also refer to a 'divine revelation' as in Matthew 7:22, but it must be stressed that whatever the meaning of praying and prophesying may be in respect to the man, they have precisely the same meaning in respect to the woman.

At first sight the second statement in chapter 14 seems to contradict the instructions of the first statement about women praying and prophesying. If a woman ought not to speak in church, how could she possibly pray and preach? Is the apostle hedging this role with qualifications and restrictions? The reference to 'the law' here can hardly mean the Law of Moses, but more likely means local custom.

To summarise, women are allowed to pray and speak forth in the church. But instructions are given to both women (wives) and men not to noisily chatter in the assembly, particularly if such outbursts were to occur at the breaking of bread memorial service.

The head covering

There was just the one restriction in regard to the woman praying and prophesying in public; she had to have her head 'covered', otherwise she was acting dishonourably. To assess what this head covering means, we must look at the social life and conventions of the time in the cities where Paul established his churches - since this will give us important clues for the interpretation of the two passages. Only with this background can we grasp what Paul is talking about.

James Dunn makes the point that the household was the basic unit of the state. Within the household, the primary fact was the absolute power of the 'paterfamilias', that is, the male head of the family or household. Single women and widows could have a considerable degree of independence in practice but even so were legally under the guardianship of the family's senior male member. Wives, however, had no choice but to be subordinate and submissive. Women probably wore head shawls, had long hair and wore a shift dress down to the feet.

The subordination of women was similar in this country in Victorian times, when the Christadelphian faith was established. Father's word was law. A wife did what she was told. The view that women were inferior in status to men had long infiltrated into Christian sects and denominations, and was adopted by Christadelphia. Hats, long hair and long skirts were the fashion of the day. Today, in the 21st century social mores are different from Paul's day, and Victorian times. Women are equal in status. No hats, short hair and jeans are in fashion, which, of course, does not mean that women are less godly than their sisters of former times. Compelling sisters to wear Westernised hats in the ecclesia seems to be following Victorian tradition, not Bible teaching about freedom in Christ.

Note: *A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man*

*created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because [on account of] the angels, the woman ought to have a **sign of authority** on her head (I Corinthians 11:7-10).* (In regard to the reference to angels, F. F. Bruce considers that it probably means that angels are invisibly present at church services and can learn from the orderly behaviour of the children of God.)

At first sight the above verses seem to be an unbending statement of male hierarchy: *God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of man, man is the head of woman.* This seems to refer to the creation account in Genesis chapter 2. Thus man is the glory of God, while woman reflects the glory of man, although this hierarchical relationship is, in fact, qualified by recognition that woman gives birth to man (verse 12).

Within this context, too little recognition has been given to the fact that the woman has **her own authority** to minister in the church. Her head covering gives her this authority. If a woman is the glory of man (Greek *andros*, i.e. the 'male' or 'husband') then her head covering is there to **hide man's glory** in the presence of God and the angels. Therefore man's glory, which is the woman, must be covered, so that in her prayer and prophecy she glorifies **only God**. The head covering is what gives her the 'authority' to do so.

In contrast to what many have assumed, the head covering was not intended as a symbol of woman's subjection to man. On the contrary, Paul explicitly defends a woman's right to engage in public worship because **she has her own authority**. Having accepted this need to give God the glory (and not as a symbol of inferior status), the woman is able to fulfil her duties of praying and holding forth the counsel of God in the ecclesia.

But what was the actual head covering? In verse 15 we read: *that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.* The Greek word here is *peribolaion*, from *pen* 'around' and *hallo* 'to throw', which refers to the hair being wrapped and bound up. In verses 6 and 7 there is a different Greek word for covered. It is *katalupto* 'to cover up', 'cover oneself'. The KJV margin for verse 15 reads 'veil', but if the apostle Paul had meant the covering to be a veil, he would have used the Greek for veil, that is *kalumma*. In fact, it is *kalumma* in 2 Corinthians 4:13-16, where he refers to Moses completely covering or veiling his face to prevent the Israelites seeing the glory of God.

If the 'covering' has nothing to do with a veil or head shawl, then it is an injunction to bind up the hair to comply with decency and decorum. Outside in the heat of the day a woman might have worn a shawl to protect her from the sun; but in the house she very likely wore a head band of some sort. If then she wore a shawl or head band in the ecclesia, there would be no point in Paul saying 'Cover your head' since it would already be covered up! Long hair neatly bound up fits in with the prevalent conventions regarding an honourable woman's hairstyle.

Dishevelled hair would have evoked a picture of ritual ecstasy in mystery Greek cults, when prophetesses were speaking in gibberish. The fear would be that outsiders might think the Christian church was simply another pagan cult. The argument of 11:2-16 then, is not so much about 'creational' differences between men and women, but primarily in support of bound-up hair. And this not in order to restrict women praying and speaking forth, but that their ministry might, with a respectable hairstyle, not be distracting, when the congregation was praising the Lord.

Another weighty social convention would have been the importance of household management, to which I have already referred. It was basically a patriarchal institution, in which

society wives had no choice but to be submissive. 1 Corinthians 14:35 says *women should ask their own husbands at home*. A potentially confusing element is the fact that the Greek *gune* can mean 'wife' as well as 'woman'. It is likely that Paul is here speaking of wives, rather than women in general, *wives should ask their husbands at home*.

Paul may have had in mind wives flaunting their new-found freedom in Christ, by acting in a disorderly way in public meetings in the church. The probability is that wives were passing judgement on the preaching activities of their husbands. In light of the social conventions of the time, such conduct would be 'disgraceful'. So by discussing it with their husbands at home, the honour of both home and church would be safeguarded.

The church at Corinth

The ecclesia was in a shambles. Paul had received reports of unruly behaviour, and that strong personalities were leading divisions. Some members had resorted to pagan courts to settle civil disputes. Gross immorality was being condoned. Some people were getting drunk at the breaking of bread service. Some could eat meat offered to idols now being sold in the market place but others were offended by this practice. There was rowdiness in the church on the part of both men and women. As already stated, Paul rebukes the men speaking in tongues, who were babbling away when there was no interpreter present, and he tells them to 'keep quiet', as he later tells the noisy chattering women (wives) to 'keep quiet'.

To both parties Paul is saying 'be still', settle down and proceed with your worship as befits Christians, not pagans. His edict did not mean that brothers and sisters should not speak in the meeting from then on.

The whole question of women having a head covering is mentioned only here in the epistle to the Corinthians, nowhere else in Paul's letters. It appears to be a local instruction describing the way a woman's long hair was neatly bound up above the head. This was the mark of honour, whereas cut hair or a shaved head was the badge of the prostitute! (1 Corinthians 11:6).

To sum up, Paul's edict was addressed to the Corinthian church only. It therefore follows that sisters today should not go back to a bound-up hairstyle, any more than male and female believers should revert to foot washing, anointing with oil, or laying on of hands. It is the spirit of these things which is important - women in the modern era to have neat hair and be modestly dressed, when worshipping in the presence of Jesus.

Further, a sister who has worn a hat in the ecclesia for, say, 50 years, even if mistakenly so, should not be pressurised to give up so doing; equally pressure should not be applied on those sisters who, in all conscience, can worship without wearing a hat: *Each should be fully convinced in his (her) own mind* (Romans 14:5).

Fundamental truths

I have been stressing the dates when Paul wrote his various epistles, the letters to the Corinthians about AD 53/56. A later epistle was that written to the Roman church, around AD 56/59. If Paul had meant that sisters were not to minister at church services, then doubtless he would have told them to be quiet at Rome. The converse is the case.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (Greek: diakonos, that is 'a deacon') of the church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1). A deacon held an official position in the 1st century church, as in Philippians at which we have already looked. She is said to be 'a great help'

(Greek *prostatis*, 'a patron'), so she was probably a single lady or a widow of substantial means who, by virtue of her high social status, took a leading role in ecclesial affairs. *Prostatis* is the feminine of *prostates* which means 'leader'.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. (Romans 16:3). The fact that Paul names Priscilla before her husband Aquila suggests she was the more dominant of the two. She apparently played a leading role in the church which met at their house.

Greet Mary, -who worked very hard for you (Romans 16:6).

Greet Andronicus and Junta. They are outstanding among the apostles (Romans 16:7). Here we have Junia, a female apostle! Some versions read 'Junias'. In the Greek text it is *lounian* which can be masculine or feminine, but the weight of scholarship tends towards the feminine, Junia. The translation 'Junias' reflects the male bias of some translators - the assumption that only a man could be described as an apostle. Apostle (Greek *apostolos*) means 'one sent forth', the mission being to preach the gospel just as that Christian sister had been doing.

Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord (Romans 16:12). The three ladies here (and Mary, verse 6) are commended for their 'hard working' (Greek *kopiao*, 'toiling') the term Paul uses elsewhere praising those whose ministry and leadership ought to be recognised. Here in Rome four women are so designated, but not a single man.

These godly women followed in the footsteps of Lydia, the wealthy trader in textiles at Thyatira. Paul had gone to the 'prayer place' (Greek *proseuchd*), a technical term for the spot where Jews worshipped on the Sabbath where there was no synagogue. Surprisingly the assembly was composed only of women! As a Pharisee, Paul would have had only contempt for females, as expressed in the prayer: 'O God, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, nor slave, nor woman', but now, converted to Jesus, he gladly talks to them. As a result, Lydia's heart was opened by Jesus, and she and her 'household' were baptised. Her home became the base from which Paul and his companions preached the gospel to the Philippians (Acts 16:13-15).

Words of Jesus

Jesus emancipated women as the following scriptures show:

The woman said, I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.' Then Jesus said, I who speak to you am he.' Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman . . . Many of the Samaritans believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I ever did' (John 4:25-39). *How amazing that Jesus revealed himself as Messiah to a despised Samaritan, and that a woman!*

When our Saviour died on the cross, the male disciples had proved to be cowards (apart from John) and deserted him in his hour of greatest need, but at the foot of the cross were the brave and faithful women: Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene (John 19:25).

Martha answered, 'I know he' [Lazarus] 'will rise again in the resurrection at the last day ... 'Yes Lord', she told him, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world' (John 11:24-27). *What incredible faith, and her confession was equal to that of Peter's, for which he was commended by Jesus (Matthew 18:16, 17).*

Early on the first day of the week while it was yet dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance ... Mary stood outside the tomb crying. They [*the angels*] asked her, 'Woman why are you crying?' At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. Thinking he was the gardener, she said 'Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary' (*John 20:1-18*). *Jesus did not reveal himself to Peter or the apostle John, but to a woman, Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.*

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there you will see me' (*Matthew 28:8-10*). *This is particularly significant since under Jewish law, women were not accepted as witnesses, but here they are told by Jesus himself to go forth and witness to his resurrection.*

After such testimony who dare deny a more significant role for women in Christ's ecclesia? If Paul had been writing today, to the Christadelphian church in Greece, he would have said 'Dress in respectable clothing with an honourable hairstyle, and act in a godly way when at the breaking of bread service. Pay respect to the brothers, but carry out your ecclesial duties as befits sisters in Christ.'

Christianity destroyed the barriers of race, rank, wealth, birth and gender, as we read in Galatians (written about AD 49): *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (3:28)*. This offers the church unlimited potential, leading to mutual love and respect between saints, male and female.

We, in our beloved Christadelphia, have a huge source of untapped talent, namely our sisters in Christ. It is high time they played a more prominent part in our worship and fellowship, as did women in the 1st century church. For example, reading in public from Holy Scripture and praying in meetings; and serving the emblems on a Sunday morning in remembrance of our dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ..

Bible truth is dynamic, not static, and the ecclesia of Christ must move from the 19th to the 21st century, in the presentation of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. It is possible that we are living near the end-time, when the prophecy of Joel will be fulfilled a second time: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2:17-21)*. May this prophecy, by the grace of God, be fulfilled in Christadelphia.

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Shalom aleykhem!