

The Place of Women in the Church

A burning question for many today is whether or not women may be ordained to the ministry of the church. It is often stated that any denial of such a right is demeaning to women and denies their equality with men in Christ. Requiring an all-male ministry and eldership is portrayed as sexism at its worst. More and more churches are sweeping away all restrictions on a woman exercising any part of the ministry of the church, whether in a preaching or a pastoral (including governmental) role. The Free Presbyterian Church takes the Biblical position of historic Christianity on this issue and is therefore at variance with the modern trend.

The New Testament shows that women participated in the public prayer meetings of the church (Acts 1:14). As well as praying, they also prophesied. We are expressly told that Philip's four daughters did so (Acts 21:9). Paul tells the Corinthians that any woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head (I Cor. 11:5). Yet in the very same epistle Paul goes on to make this emphatic statement: "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....It is a shame for women to speak in the church" (I Cor. 14:34, 35.).

There are those who do not scruple to say that Paul here contradicts himself. Such people deny the basis for Christianity. If we cannot trust an inspired apostle of Christ at this point, how can we trust him in any other statement of doctrine or practice? Paul made no mistake on this issue. Clearly, from all he says, there are times and places in which a woman may speak and others in which she may not. In I Timothy 2:12 he makes it clear what should govern the decision as to when and where it is proper or improper for a woman to speak: "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." Here is the key. A woman is not permitted a pastoral or governmental position over men in a New Testament church. No ministry that places her in such a position is open to her. There is no question but that a woman may be every bit as spiritual and spiritually gifted as any man. That is not the point. The place of public ministry and pastoral government is not open to her, "not turned over to" her by the Lord, as the literal force of I Corinthians 14:34 has it. The Lord will give her fitting opportunities to exercise her gifts. She has a special role in the teaching of other women and the young (Titus 2:4; II Tim. 1:5; 3:15). She may be a Priscilla and use her home as a pulpit to teach needy people the gospel (Acts 18:26). She may be so beneficial to the work of the church as to earn the title Phoebe earned, "the servant (or, deaconess) of the church" (Rom. 16:1). Here there is no hint that the word deaconess has reference to any elected office, but to Phoebe's selfless service to the church.

To sum up: "If woman is not assigned a different position, this is done, not by God, but by man, and by man in contradiction to God....Whatever sphere we may assign to woman in our church practice today dare not contravene her divinely ordained subjection and obedience, for this would conflict with God's own order" (R. C. H. Lenski). Thus the Free Presbyterian Church, gladly affirming the rich ministry of godly women in the church throughout history, nonetheless maintains that no woman may Scripturally be elected or ordained to any preaching, pastoral, or governmental office in the church.