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### SPECIAL ISSUE

### WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Set Our Women Free . . . . . Norman L. Parks  
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# SET OUR WOMEN FREE

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Perhaps in no area is Church of Christ thought so legalistic, literalistic, and backward as on woman's role in the congregation. In neither thought nor practice are we even abreast of the first century church. The thrust of early Christianity was toward women's liberation in a world that treated them as inferiors. The rapid elevation of women in our contemporary society has as yet not melted one drop from the frozen attitudes and frosted platitudes of our male-dominated church. Hence there is a compelling demand for a reexamination of this problem, from both the scriptural perspective and our mounting social knowledge.

The two most serious charges against the subordination of women to the near-status of children are that it has impoverished the church by wasting the creative energies of the majority of every congregation and has done grave psychological damage to the psyche of untold numbers of potential Marys, Priscas, and Joannas of our time. Not only has it blocked many of the outlets

for their spiritual drives, but it has made it difficult for them to deal with those human weaknesses of jealousy, rivalry, fear, pride, and prejudice which are best confronted in the open community. All preachers and most members can testify to the consequences of the diversion of this energy into unhealthy subterranean ways. Who has not heard the charge that a few women are attempting to "run the church" from behind the scenes? And who has not witnessed the results of "she-elders" cracking the whip over their visible counterparts and shaping decisions that rightfully should be made by the whole church?

The fact remains, however, that in the case of almost all women the "business" of the church is conducted as if they did not exist. Though many are gainfully employed and contribute their own earnings to the treasury, they are denied any voice in how it is spent. Though they manage a sizeable part of the wealth of every congregation, their know-how is not sought or desired. Though

\*The author is deeply in debt to a number of women for help in the preparation of this essay. He is particularly in debt to four noble women in the church who answered long questionnaires aimed at ascertaining what the women of the church feel and think on this problem. They are Bonnie Johns, Washington, D.C., Judy Romero, Rancho de Taos, N.M., Bobbie Lee Holley, Chapel Hill, N.C., and Elizabeth Mansur, Galt, Calif., any one of whom could bring greater sensitivity, insight, and special knowledge to bear on this question than the author. Perhaps the mere fact that it is a man, rather than a woman, who presents this essay is another attestation of the male chauvinism that is routine among us. This survey of women-thought has convinced the writer that our "rulers of Israel" have little inkling of the deep sense of frustration, outrage, bitterness, resignation, or despair felt by great numbers of women in the church over their deprivation and subordination at a time when avenues of achievement and fulfillment are multiplying apace in the secular world.

at least as well educated as the men, as devout, and as learned in the arts of gracious presiding and public speaking, their lips are sealed in assembly.

## A Men's Club Affair . . .

Denied the role of Mary, it would seem that these daughters of Martha would at least be permitted to wait at the Lord's table and witness in their sensitivity to his death and resurrection, as did their counterparts who in the long ago huddled close to the cross, followed to the tomb, and winged the news that he lived again. Or perhaps from the vestibule usher the assembly to their seats. Not so! They are required to assume the position of invisibility. Never given the recognition nor the meaningful work of deaconesses, their activities are confined to behind-the-scenes and rarely arise above the petty, routine, and boresome. The ancient church had able women witnesses for God, such as the daughters of Philip and the much-travelled Prisca, and Paul's letters pay them high praise. The literature of the modern church is a men's club affair without spiritual heroines. A little light is beginning to filter through with the emerging "mission seminars," and some constructive activity has come out of inner city programs like Shiloh. But the challenge of an outstanding university woman that "God needs thinking, meditating, studying, informed women to witness for him" would sound threatening to the ears of the typical church leadership.<sup>1</sup>

Frankness compels us to recognize that the contemporary congregational enterprise

is oppressive of women, enervating, and debilitating of their intellectual and emotional resources and does violence to the genius of Christianity. The Genesis account of creation establishes clearly that the relationship between man and woman was full, free, and equal:

God said, "Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let *them* be masters . . ." God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.<sup>2</sup>

He gave them equal dominion over the good earth and commanded them to "conquer it." This command was not set aside after pride had brought the whole creation under corruption. When women physicists, chemists, and botanists search the mysteries of our blue planet today, they are carrying out the first commandment. Nor was human pride allowed to defeat God's plan. Christ's mission was to restore every person to that perfect relationship with God and with each other which had been initiated in Eden.

The second account of creation in Genesis 2-3 does not alter this picture of equality between man and woman. True, it describes Eve as a "helpmeet"—literally "like him"—which emphasizes her status of equality, not subordination. Nor did God concoct any curse for woman. What followed the fall was the inevitable consequence of the act. God merely laid bare in Genesis 3: 14-19 what the future held. To Eve he said, "Your yearning shall be for your husband, yet he will lord it over you." This change from equality to subordination was not a part of God's social order, and the Good

<sup>1</sup> This obviously true statement, incorporated in a letter seeking expanded readership of a new religious journal, "evoked several nasty responses," according to the writer. One reply demanded, "Where does God say this in *his* word?"

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are from the Jerusalem Bible.

News for women was that in Christ it was to end.

### Only One Lord . . .

There is no mistaking the teaching of Jesus on this point. In the City of Cain, he reminded his followers, subordination and superordination is the established order, the so-called rulers "lord it over" the ruled, and "their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you" (Mk. 10: 42-43). In the kingdom of God Jesus is lord, but none other, and he is the sole authority. There is no place for pride, self-exaltation, or male dominance. Men and women as God's children are in a family relationship of love, equality, and preference for others. The wife "is equally an heir to the life of grace" with the husband (1 Pet. 3:7). Elders are not authorities; they are to lead by example rather than by command (1 Pet. 5:3). All members are instructed to "wrap yourselves in humility to be servants of each other" (1 Pet. 5:5). Husbands as well as wives should "give way to one another in obedience to Christ" (Eph. 5:21). True liberty is found in serving one another "in works of love" since it lies in the free choice of the restored good will (Gal. 5:14). In the family of God there is to be no competition, no conceit; ". . . but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself" (Phil. 2:3).

Spiritually, then, woman was not made subordinate to man. In the spiritual kingdom, which is the church, husbands and wives are not superiors and inferiors, but equal individuals restored to the original Eden relationship. The injunction "be you subject one to another" puts all members, male and female, on an equal plane. A man

should be subject to woman? Yes, in the same sense—no less and no more—that a woman should be subject to man in the Christian relationship. It is a relationship of mutuality.

Jesus came into a society in which women were assigned to a plane with slaves and children. She could be "put away" privately at her husband's will by a writing of divorce-ment. In the synagogue she sat behind a concealing lattice work and had no part in the service. She was forbidden to learn the law and no rabbi would condescend to instruct her. She could not teach even the youngest children in the rabbinical schools. The Jewish morning prayer in which the man thanked God that he had not been made "a Gentile, a slave, or a woman" pictured the plight of women. In the Greek world the status of the respectable woman was probably even lower. The civic and religious life moved along without her. She did not sit at meat with the guests of the house. Those women who exercised political power and presided at salons where poetry was read and serious dialogue was carried on were influential courtesans. The lyre girls who led the procession of the drunken Alciabedes to the banquet table in Plato's *Symposium* were young prostitutes.

Christ violated—or transcended—the codes governing women, treating them as equals, developing mutually sustaining friendships, and revealing the attitude and will of God toward them. They figured prominently in his ministry, serving as a part of his entourage, and helping to foot the bill. So far as we know, women—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna—were the only ones who helped finance his ministry. He engaged women in dialogue and they hung upon his word. His gentle rebuke to Martha and his praise for Mary's concern for spiritual truth over kitch-

en affairs reveals his true emphasis. The contemporary church's reduction of women to backroom Marthas is directly contrary to his teaching and example. He made women the subject of some of his greatest parables. Those who followed him to Golgotha were "many." To women fell the honor of bearing the thrilling news of his resurrection to the men. The close relationship of Jesus to women makes clear that loyalty to his teaching and example requires a far more important activity for them than the contemporary church provides. Surely any principle practiced by the head of the church in his personal ministry could not be wrong for his followers to incorporate in their service to him.

Such was the case in the early church, in which women were prophets and deaconesses. Churches flourished in women's homes. One group of women became the core of the first assembly in Europe. Wonderful Prisca became a business partner of Paul's. In a conversion of historic importance, she taught Apollos "the new way." When she and Aquila moved to Asia, their home housed a new church there. And from there they sent "their warmest wishes" by Paul to the Corinthian assembly. Moved to Rome, they were well enough known in the capital for Paul to incorporate in his letter to the Romans a greeting to "Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ, who risked death to save my life . . . [and] to the church that meets in their house." How valuable this woman gospel preacher was to the cause is pictured by Paul in the words that "all the churches among the pagans" owe this couple a debt of gratitude. Many find significance in the fact that her name generally precedes her husband's in holy text. Writing more than a century later, the Carthaginian, Tertullian, preserved this image in

declaring, "By the holy Prisca, the gospel is preached."

Nor was Prisca alone. Euodia and Syntyche were a help to Paul at Philippi when he was "fighting to defend the Good News," and their names "are written in the book of life." The apostle praised two other women immigrants to Rome, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, "who worked hard for the Lord." Their names are bracketed with a male preacher, Persis, "who has done so much for the Lord" (Rom. 16:12). The importance of these women as God's ministers is reflected in Paul's flat declaration that "they have labored side by side with me in the gospel" (Phil. 4:3). Verily, it is God's will that women should be equal teammates with men, not shrinking, silent, subordinate pew-sitters in the kingdom.

### A Participatory Religion . . .

That beginning Christianity in its elevation and liberation of women broke away from Judaistic and pagan tradition is evidenced in the fact that it was a *participatory* religion to a degree totally foreign to the accepted practice of the Mediterranean world. The religious processions and rites of ancient Athens were purely male; Athene might be a goddess, but her public devotees were men. At Ephesus the women figuring in the rites of Diana were temple prostitutes. The religion of Jesus was, in essence, not a cult with sacred rites, but a way of life whose every act embodied religious significance. The chief characteristic of its assemblies was the involvement of all of its members as active participants: women prayed, women prophesied, women shared in the love feast and in the deliberations. This must be accepted as true in spite of Paul's instructions covering special situations in churches

planted in the heart of pagan cultures. Paul reported to the *whole* assembly (this had to include women) at Antioch the results of his first great missionary tour. When Paul and Barnabas were authorized to go to Jerusalem to discuss the issue of Gentiles having to observe the Law, "all the members of the church saw them off" (Acts 15:3). At Jerusalem they were welcomed "by the church." If there was at this time a private conference concerned with Paul's equal status as an apostle, the great doctrinal issue confronting the church was decided in open assembly—an impressive challenge to our modern decision-makers who scorn the ability and the right of the membership to make even routine decisions and arrogate to themselves all authority in such matters. Paul, Barnabas, and James spoke before the entire body, and Peter's powerful speech on this occasion "silenced the entire assembly" (Acts 15:12). Acting on the recommendation of James, the apostles and elders agreed that delegates should be sent to Antioch and "the whole church concurred with this." Then back went the party to Antioch, "where they summoned the whole community and delivered the letter" (Acts 15:30).

The women and men who participated in these historic events would doubtless find puzzling our contemporary situation, in which the affairs of the Christian community are routinely conducted by a handful of authorities (including the hired "minister") and handed down *ex cathedra* to a silent membership. Not only are women entirely excluded from the process, but the majority of the males are in effect restricted to mak-

ing suggestions to the "board of elders," who reserve the decisions to themselves.

### No Power Structure . . .

This debilitating situation arises from the erroneous concept that the church has "offices" which carry inherent power, including the power to make decisions for the whole *koinonia*. The chief officers, the bishops, are rulers by divine right, even as kings.<sup>3</sup> The mistranslations of the King James Bible, deliberately designed to fortify the power of the monarch of England, provide the basis for this claim. James put it succinctly, "No bishop, no king!" Jesus categorically denied that the church is a power structure and he flatly ruled out any role of authority. The elder does not fill an office, but does a *work*. Sister Phoebe held no church office, but nonetheless was a deaconess. Ministers (better translated "slaves"), whether men or women, do not hold office, but *serve* in whatever capacity they can perform. Every Christian is a minister, or slave, because he has been bought in the world's marketplace "with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). The professionalization of that generic term is one of the tragedies of modern religion and women are among the victims. Otherwise we would have women ministers in music, ministers of counseling, ministers of youth guidance, ministers of ghetto outreach. The dislodging of the deplorable view that the congregation is an organizational power structure, with power-wielding offices, would go far toward restoring the ancient order of a genuinely participatory religion and freeing both sexes

for a more dynamic role in the life of the church.

In spite of Paul's constant co-laborers in the gospel with women, his acknowledgement that women both prayed and prophesied, as was foretold in the Old Testament,<sup>4</sup> in the assembly,<sup>5</sup> and his powerful declaration that sex carried no weight in the kingdom, he has been invoked as the authority for imposing second-class citizenship and silence on women in the contemporary church. It is amazing how the example and teaching of Jesus, the whole basic thrust of the Christian message, the practices of the early church, and Paul's own life and sweeping teachings to the contrary can be buried in favor of a few passages he penned dealing with a special situation confronting the church in a Gentile world. No matter that our society is no longer pagan, no matter that our culture does not hold it "shameful" that a woman address a male gathering, no matter that women are as educated and as informed as the men, no matter that dialogue has disappeared from the assembly and its session is formalized and stereotyped. The rule, placed on a par with the highest truths of the Bible, still is that if a woman need know anything about the gospel and the *didache*, let her ask her husband at home!

### Special Situations . . .

Let us look at these special situation passages. Paul in 1 Tim. 2:8-15 affirms that a woman is not to teach or have authority over men, but rather is to keep silent. This is interpreted today to mean that she could teach one man in private, but not two men

at assembly time, as if a woman has two lives—one in the church and one out of the church. This "in and out" concept makes nonsense of Christianity. The Christian life is a unity; whatever a Christian does is done in the church. It is not necessary to assume, as some scholars have done, that the letter to Timothy was not written by Paul, but was a second century product reflecting a changed perspective. It is only necessary to read it in its historical context as springing from the pagan mores confronting the Gentile churches. It is remarkable that the twentieth century church can blithely set aside Paul's insistence on a veil as nothing more than conformity to a temporal cultural symbol, but demand as unchanging law "silence" from women in the assembly. Paul's instruction here, as elsewhere, was plainly intended to protect the church from the reputation of being a resort for loose women playing bold and leading roles among the congregated men. Paul knew how to become all things to all men to win some to the great cause.

In the case of the Corinthian church this concern is obviously present in his instructions in 1 Cor. 14:34-35. Women of that day were for the most part illiterate or un-read. Normally the husband was in a better position knowledge-wise than the wife. To preserve decorum in the assembly, it was not inappropriate in a Gentile city for him to say that wives should ask their husbands at home rather than to project their ignorance into the free exchange of the assembly. For such a woman to assert a superior knowledge over that of a male member would violate propriety and open the church to charges of immorality by the pagans.

<sup>3</sup> The Anglican doctrine of *vox presbyteri, vox Dei* is firmly established among us. To question an elder's decision is tantamount to challenging God. The degree to which elders have arrogated to themselves instructions given to the corporate church or to individual Christians is pictured in Ledbetter, "Banned in Nashville," *Integrity*, October, 1972. Their function is not to make decisions, but to teach and lead the congregation in functioning in matters of common concern and action.

<sup>4</sup> "After this I will pour out my spirit on all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy . . ." Joel, 2:28.

<sup>5</sup> That women did this in assembly is made clear by Paul's statement that the head should be covered "out of respect for the angels" (1 Cor. 11:11), the guardians of due order in the public worship.

Some attention should be given to the fact that Paul in dealing with this question used the personal approach: "personally I do not allow" and "my reasons are." This suggests that under the circumstances he was using his own judgment as a responsible minister of God. A similar response for a woman today going as a missionary to rural India would be to elect the veil. Moreover, it is evident from the Corinthian letter that "the Law" was, in part, the basis of Paul's thinking about a woman addressing an assembly and some of his personal feeling on the matter was rooted in his education in the strictest Judaism. But if he were alive today, he would not find it shocking for a woman to do this. Nor would he offer the same reasons: because the Law says so and so, because man was made first, or because it is "shameful." Nor do contemporary church leaders offer these reasons for keeping women silent. Those who have heard Senator Maggie Smith sway the United States Senate, or witnessed over TV the impressive and relaxed presiding over the 1972 Democratic convention by Yvonne Burke, or heard a moving feminine solo could not believe that there is something wrong about a woman's voice being heard in public. God is not God of the absurd.

#### Possible Ambivalence . . .

Let us look at the Pauline dictum, "I am not giving permission for a woman to teach or tell a man what to do" (more popularly, "to have authority over men"). This assertion is often removed from its context in time and given an inerrancy and eternity equal to the command to love. It is commonly accepted that Peter could learn, make error, and grow in Christian experience. But to suggest that Paul was perhaps ambivalent

in his attitude and that his various statements about women reflected a maturing process in the Christian faith raises the hackles of the super-orthodox. Actually it may draw us closer to Paul to recognize that he was living with his own deeply ingrained views of women, hammered home in the school of the strictest Pharisees, and at the same time his new Christian understandings. It was the triumph of the latter that led him to write one of the greatest truths: "There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3: 28). Yes, the distinctions which Judaism and pagan culture had imposed on women are no more; God has restored his children to that relationship ordained in the Garden. In the church man is not superior and woman inferior; the distinctions of a sinful world have been dissolved.

From a practical point of view, teaching in the public assembly is different today from what it was in the early church, where it was derived from power from "on high." It is now based on knowledge of the written text, knowledge of languages, and spiritual insight and experience. Qualifications are intelligence, integrity, and education. Sex has nothing to do with the ability to learn or to teach. The "gift" of teaching relates to the qualities of personality and commitment regardless of sex. The gifted teacher, whether man or woman, in sharing his or her special knowledge or acumen is not "having authority" over the listeners. Authority connotes power to command, to control, to determine. In the kingdom of heaven the power phenomenon is out. The woman who teaches a class with men as participants is not violating a scriptural ban. Yet we have churches in which women with advanced degrees, who teach scores of mature men in

university classes, are forced to be mummies in the assembly.<sup>6</sup>

If we could accept the fact that Christ's *ecclesia* is a free association of free and equal individuals functioning within the framework of mutuality and that this association is devoid of any element of power, hierarchy, or subordination, the creativity of both men and women would be enormously expanded.

Are we to assume that what Paul has had to say regarding women has no permanent significance? Not at all, if we understand him to be saying that, whatever the circumstances, the Christian woman should never lose her womanliness. Custom and culture may change, but womanliness never. She is equal to man, but different, and out of this difference flow rich contributions to the life of the church.

#### Psychological Damage . . .

The damage to the psyche of the mature and intelligent woman in a church where a twelve-year-old boy has more rights and privileges than she has remains unresearched. But we can be confident that it is a widespread phenomenon. Indeed, the process of psychological wounding begins early. Concerning the maturing of a girl in the church one able woman writer has observed:

(S)uppression of women in the church of Christ begins in childhood. By the time I was six I knew I had made a great mistake being born a woman! In Bible classes everyone was encouraged to answer the questions; but in a Bible school program where we were in the "public assembly,"

the boys got the main parts, they got to lead the songs, the girls were reduced to rows of parrots reciting in unison. A girl begins in puzzlement, progresses in private resentment, and ends in either dull acceptance or inner rage. Imagine sitting in Bible college classes with your brothers in Christ, then being forced to sit in a church Bible class listening to a farm-hand hem and haw and mutilate the scriptures, simply because he is a man and you are not!

A book could be written about the indignities and embarrassments women have suffered at the hands of unctuous and aggressive preachers. People treated as unequals tend to become unequals. Women in the church have been put down so long that many of them have come to believe that they have little to offer the Lord except washing communion cups, cooking church dinners, and stapling the church bulletin! Denial of significant participation in decision-making and dialogue tends to stultify the mind. "It is no wonder," observes one woman critic, "so many women in the church are about as interesting as stale bread, when they are assigned the status of a five-year-old."

There is little doubt that the church has fed the exodus of women into gainful employment because they can find so little rewarding activity in the congregation. In the employment field she can weigh business matters, make decisions, and share in those experiences which enrich life and enable the personality to flower. Surely it is time to recognize that something is wrong when a field hand can attend the "monthly business meeting of the church,"<sup>7</sup> but a dynamic

<sup>6</sup> One such university professor shares her learning with women in many churches, and later the men, who steer clear of her classes, listen to the tapes!

<sup>7</sup> Of course this is no business meeting of the church so long as the majority are barred from attending because of sex. It may be further observed that the church is not a business enterprise, but a growing organism. The cutting off of a vital part of the organism from its functioning is violent surgery.

# THE PROPHETESS

HOY LEDBETTER

business woman making \$20,000 a year is denied any voice. Examples of such absurdities can be multiplied: a man with a high school education blunders along as director of the Bible school while a woman university graduate with professional school supervision experience is confined to a kindergarten class; a preacher trained in a Bible college on sermon outlines is hired to do counseling instead of a woman prepared in psychology, sociology, and social work.

## Catching up . . .

But what of the plea that the contemporary church is merely abiding by long-established custom, and to break it would tend to disturb the church and cause disorder?<sup>8</sup> The answer is that ignorance and prejudice should not be allowed to dominate the "sensibilities" of the church. Society has already moved far beyond the tradition in the Churches of Christ. Women in other religious bodies are finding far more stimulating and rewarding experience. The least we can do is to catch up with the first century!

In conclusion, it is time for the church to stop adhering to tradition and begin adhering to Christian principle. Common sense tells us that decisions collectively discussed and collectively arrived at carry far more power and commitment than those arrived at by five or seven men meeting *en camera*. People grow by participation, not by sitting passively and being told what to think, what to believe, and what is to be done. Women have much to contribute to the meetings. With respect to the reading of the scriptures, there are many units which may be read

more effectively and appropriately by women than by men. What man could match the warm tones of the female voice in reading Mary's song of joy? Is there not something to gain when women can join the circle of prayers voiced by the assembly? Many men have never heard a woman pray! Is it not true that girls are more alert and effective as ushers? Has not a major dimension of religious experience been lost because the mouths of women prophets have been closed? Pulpit sermons are solos, but sermons in songs can be preached by women soloists and mixed groups. The early church met around a table, not before a pulpit—a situation which promoted participation. Dialogue fosters spiritual growth, and mixed dialogue would make an important addition to the life of the church. Women have many specialties not normally pursued by men; the church should have the advantage of the knowledge and experience of women in social service, counseling, juvenile guidance, problems of the aged, problems of the poor, nursing, library service, and many other fields in which an informed Christian approach is needed. To make this possible woman's voice will have to be heard in assembly.

The freedom that is in Christ Jesus will remain under a shadow until we come resolutely to grips with all those hangups which have handicapped the psychological and spiritual growth of women in the *ecclesia*. To conclude on an ominous note: What if the males of the church have to give an account in the day of judgment for all of those talents buried through the ages simply because they were given to women? □

The Biblical prophetess provides us with a significant frame of reference for evaluating woman's scriptural role in the church today. Her work may be ascertained by determining that of her male counterpart, who receives greater attention in the Bible.

The prophet is the New Testament *preacher*. Gerhard Friedrich says: "The prophet is essentially a proclaimer of God's Word" (*TDNT*, VI, 829). The dictionary defines preacher as "one who proclaims the gospel." Identity is likewise determined by etymology: *prophet* is from the Greek *pro*, before + *phanai*, to say; *preacher* is from the Latin *prae*, before + *dicare*, to say. This identity also obtained in Elizabethan English: "to prophesy," which in the 17th century began to have the predominant meaning of "to predict," originally meant exactly the same as "to preach." Jeremy Taylor's work on the "Liberty of Prophesying" was written to uphold the freedom of preaching. The term is rarely used in the New Testament in the sense of foretelling the future.

A fuller definition is given by Friedrich: "Primitive Christian prophecy is the inspired speech of charismatic preachers through whom God's plan of salvation for the world and the community and His will for the life of individual Christians are made known." This definition accords with such passages as 1 Cor. 14:3, 24, 31, where the term denotes teaching, admonishing, comforting, and convicting men of sin and leading them to worship God. It is therefore obvious that no

other functionary in the New Testament so exactly corresponds to what the preacher is intended to be today.

The Bible draws a sharper distinction between the prophet and the *evangelist* than we usually do today. It is true that at times there was considerable overlapping of these functions; "normally, however, prophecy is preaching to the congregation and evangelism is missionary preaching" (Friedrich, *op. cit.*, 855).

Friedrich also points out the close connection between prophecy and prayer in the New Testament, citing the examples of Anna, the prophets at Antioch, the men and women in 1 Cor. 11:4-5, and the instructions of 1 Thess. 5:17-20. He argues forcefully that prayer in 1 Cor. 14 is the special function of the prophet. If his assumption that "prayer, to which the congregation says Amen, is one of the tasks of the prophets" is correct, it lends significance to Paul's combination of the two in women who "pray or prophesy" in 1 Cor. 11:5.

In any event, the prophetess, whose work cannot be distinguished from that of the prophet, is well known in the Bible, as the review which follows will show.

Miriam is called "the prophetess" in Ex. 15:20. She and Aaron complained about Moses' prophetic superiority in Num. 12:2: "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" That Miriam is mentioned first and that the feminine verb is used indicate she instigated

<sup>8</sup> There remains, also, the hoary claim that women are the "weaker" sex and must take the back seat on this account. Weaker when it comes to putting the shot, yes. But when it comes to intellectual strength, longevity, resistance to disease, or ability to withstand the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," no.

this complaint, which (rather than her sex) is why she (and not Aaron) was smitten with leprosy. Mic. 6:4 also notes her status: "I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."

Deborah, "a prophetess . . . [who] was judging Israel at that time" (Ju. 4:4), had a well-established authority which extended over the whole nation. When she "summoned" General Barak to lead the fight for liberation from the Canaanites, he refused to go out unless she would go with him!

Huldah was "the prophetess" to whom Josiah's messengers went when he told them to "go, inquire of the Lord" (2 Ki. 22:14f.). Her standing as a prophetess must have been widely recognized.

"The prophetess Noadiah" (Neh. 6:14) is denounced as one of those who bothered Nehemiah during the rebuilding of Jerusalem. She is comparable to the prophetesses in Ezek. 13:17f. who prophesied "out of their own minds." Their trouble was not their sex, but their false message.

When Jesus' parents brought him to the temple to present him to the Lord, they met Anna, an aged "prophetess," who "gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Lk. 2:36-38). That her prophetic ministry was prolonged and widely influential is indicated by the imperfect tense in Greek—"she was habitually speaking"—and by the fact that "all who were looking" could not have been present on this one occasion.

In addition to these prophetesses under the Law, there were various other women who spoke prophetically without being referred to as prophetesses. The prophetess was exceptional, but no Biblical writer considered her prominence inappropriate. "No law forbade her to speak; no custom hindered her from rising to a position of great

influence" (W.F. Adeney, *HDB*, IV, 934).

As we move to the early church we find Peter explaining the outpouring on Pentecost with a reference from Joel: ". . . your daughters shall prophesy . . . and on my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17). Accordingly we find in the same book (21:9) Philip's "four unmarried daughters, who prophesied." NEB accurately conveys the continuing aspect of their work by rendering (the present participle *propheteuousai*): "who possessed the gift of prophecy." J. R. Lumby comments: "These daughters, instead of resting at home, took upon them the hard duty of publishing the message of the Gospel" (*Acts*, 370). Their influence on Luke-Acts, as indicated in quotations in Eusebius, has often been noted.

In 1 Cor. 11:5 Paul wrote: "Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head." He certainly expected women to pray and prophesy. It is a fact that this verse must be reconciled with two others in which he enjoined silence on women, but that reconciliation cannot force the prophetess from this passage. To hold, as some do, that Paul did not approve of their prophetic work would have him engaged in a prolonged discussion that was entirely superfluous! If women were not to be prophetesses, he could easily have said so and avoided the discussion.

The Thyatiran Jezebel called herself a prophetess (Rev. 2:20). Her condemnation as a subversive obviates the question of whether she might not otherwise have been accepted as a prophetess. Yet we may wonder if she could have achieved such a status in the absence of a climate in the church congenial to prophetesses.

Post-apostolic prophetesses include Prisca and Maximilla who were prominent in the

Montanist movement of the second century. This movement, which the great Christian apologist Tertullian joined in 207, was too ascetic for general acceptance, and it was the focal point for a growing belief that prophets no longer received divine inspiration; but the prophetesses were there.

The apocryphal document *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which, according to Tertullian, was "compiled" by a presbyter of Asia "out of love for Paul," is relevant to our discussion in that Thecla, a woman converted by Paul at Iconium, is said to have preached the word. Among those who hold the story is based on fact is W.M. Ramsay, who said: "Thekla became the type of female Christian teacher, preacher, and baptiser, and her story was quoted as early as the second century as a justification of the right of women to teach and to baptise" (*The Church in the Roman Empire*, 375).

The farther one comes from New Testament times, the farther woman is removed from the prophetic role, until finally we find her, at least for the time, in the convent. Just as with the loss of the prophet's voice in Judaism women were assigned to increasingly subordinate religious roles, so within the church the status of women declined alongside a growing belief that prophetic inspiration had ceased. It seems that God could only make his women heard as long as he unmistakably poured out his Spirit on the daughters and maidservants.

Were there in the New Testament, as in the Old, women who spoke prophetically without being called prophetesses? There are some interesting possibilities. In Phil. 4:3 Paul speaks of two women who "labored side by side with me in the gospel." Dwight Pratt may be right in saying that they "undoubtedly participated with him in preaching" (*ISBE*, V, 3103). It may be that Rom.

16:7 refers to Junia as a distinguished female apostle. This depends upon agreement with the translations which take the name as feminine and interpreting "of note among the apostles" as equivalent to "outstanding apostles." Chrysostom, who was much closer to the scene than we are, did not hesitate to call Junia an apostle. We may also mention, among several prominent women named in Rom. 16, the beloved Priscilla, to whom so many owed so much.

### Harmonizing Paul with Paul . . .

But it is not necessary to build a case on questionable passages. There are enough certain references to prophetesses to form a clear backdrop against which we may judge Paul's injunctions of silence upon women. These injunctions forbid a woman (1) to speak or even ask questions in church (1 Cor. 14:34-35); (2) to teach; (3) to have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). Absolute silence is enjoined. Moreover, the prohibitions are based on man's priority in creation and what "the law" says. Yet in 1 Cor. 11:5 he clearly implies that women may pray and prophesy. So we are challenged to harmonize Paul with Paul.

Some of the numerous attempts to reconcile what Paul forbids in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-12 with what he allows in 1 Cor. 11 must be rejected as contradicting 1 Cor. 11. Hence, we cannot say that all speaking is forbidden or that a general social custom is in view, since these would also apply to 1 Cor. 11. Nor can the tension be removed by distinguishing between private and public church meetings, or between secular and ecclesiastical spheres of activity. The Bible does not distinguish "classes" from "services," or secular from church classrooms or administrative positions. 1 Tim. 2:12 seems to ban *all* teaching as well as *all* domination of the man. This cannot apply in 1 Cor. 11. Literalistic interpreters who allow women to be Sunday school and college teachers, or administrators who have authority over men, may be commended for their casuistry (which recognizes

woman's worth and talents), but not for their exegesis.

1 Tim. 2 disallows the opinion of Grosheide and others that Paul in 1 Cor. 11 permits women to speak in public places *except* the church. It also counters the common view that speak (*lalein*) in 1 Cor. 14 refers to chatter, interruptions, or bombarding with questions or comments which turn the service into irrelevant discussion—and that the prohibition would have been applied to the Corinthian men if they had had such tendencies. Constructive speech was permitted in the synagogues—the women were allowed to ask questions seeking information—but *lalein* is not used in 1 Tim. 2. To make *to teach or to have authority over men* mean that only teaching which involves domination of men is forbidden does not fit well with Paul's emphasis on the woman's role of silent *learner*. It is better to regard these as two distinct prohibitions: (1) to teach; (2) to have authority over men.

We cannot dismiss the problem by saying that Paul laid down a general rule which has many exceptions. There are too many exceptions. A more attractive view is that the negative passages are themselves exceptional, and that they reflect local situations of which we know little or nothing. It is possible that he combats undue feminist pressure which worked against seamliness and resulted in heated arguments between husbands and wives, which caused him to silence the women as, on occasion, he did prophets (1 Cor. 14:30). It is also possible they reflect local problems: lax morals at Corinth and heresy in the Pastorals. Corinth was notoriously immoral, and the Pastorals *do* indicate women were especially susceptible to heretical influences (due to lack of education?). These views at least recognize Paul's *Magna Charta* in Gal. 3:28 and the prominence of women in the Bible. Along this line is the view that Paul prevented women from taking the initiative in speaking, but allowed exceptions where there was *genuine pneumatic endowment*. Inspired women could speak; uninspired ones could not. Women were generally disqualified as teachers because of limited acquaintance with doctrine, but the Spirit overcame this disability and thus nullified sexual distinctions. A significant implication of this view is that a woman's education and aptitude in a nonpneumatic church are equivalent to inspiration and permit her to speak freely.

That 1 Cor. 14:34f. is the addition of a scribe who reflected the prejudice of the "Pastor" who wrote 1 Tim. lacks proof, the textual problem in 1 Cor. 14 notwithstanding.

Our solution of the difficulty must not ignore Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor

Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Here Paul directly opposes the prayer, current in different forms among the Persians, Greeks, and Jews, in which the man gives thanks that he is not a heathen, a slave, or a woman. Ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and sexual distinctions do not apply in Christ. As Lightfoot says:

Every barrier is swept away. No special claims, no special disabilities exist in Him, none *can* exist. The conventional distinctions of religious caste or of social rank, even the natural distinction of sex, are banished hence.

Christians are not blind to such distinctions (unity is not indifference), nor are they removed by force (unity is not uniformity). But no person in Christ is either superior or inferior because of circumstance of birth; inequalities deriving from birth or society are removed by the *new* birth. It will not do to say that Gal. 3:28 merely asserts woman's unrestricted right to be a Christian. Who would have doubted that? Sexual difference is not moderated; it is obliterated.

Although a Jew could retain his scruples about law, he could not claim superiority or force his scruples on others. The master could own slaves, since slavery was an established social institution, but in Christ he was not superior; in fact, his slave might be his leader in the church. But this ideal at times required *temporary* modification. So Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3)—a concession to hostile elements in society—and he took four brethren through the Mosaic purification ceremony (Acts 21). He also felt compelled to send Onesimus back to his Christian master Philemon. *Neither slave nor free* may not defy the entrenched social institutions. Therefore slaves were told to "obey in everything those who are your

earthly masters" (Col. 3:22); such respectful behavior was required "so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed" (1 Tim. 6:1).

This juxtaposition of freedom in church and servitude in society can apply to women, for the early church carefully avoided becoming a disintegrating force in the home. Imagine the reaction had the church begun a women's liberation movement! The impetus was given in Gal. 3:28, but freedom had to be restrained until hearts were prepared for it. As with slaves, so with women.

### Sexual Peculiarities . . .

It is true that the problem of liberation of women has its peculiar factors. Women and men are different biologically; but biology does not count in Christ. They have different social roles; but social institutions do not apply in Christ. However, local and temporary situations may require some special rules. Hence, Paul's demand for silence and subordination offered a corrective to the desire for immediate and complete liberation which would have had disastrous results. The tension between progressive and reactionary tendencies "is removed by understanding and therefore transcending the differences [between the sexes] in the light of God and the new aeon. Although this is of immediate and radical significance, however, it does not lead to practical consequences of a revolutionary kind" (Albrecht Oepke, "Gune," *TDNT*, I, 785).

But what of the *created differences* between the sexes? Apart from biological differences, Paul speaks of man's priority in creation and the related idea of headship; but headship should not be confused with superiority. Man is head of woman as God is head of Christ: she owes her existence to

him. 1 Cor. 11 (which focuses on the veiled prophetess, not female silence) views headship in terms of the basis of creation. However, lest we make too much of this, Paul is careful to modify it by stating: "In the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman" (1 Cor. 11:11). In a different context (Eph. 5) he enforces the concept of "one flesh" as an essential part of his discussion of husbands and wives.

His appeal to "the law" (1 Cor. 14:34) is evidently an allusion to Gen. 3:16 (the law does not specify female silence): "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." The first clause reminds us of Paul's insistence on absolute equality in the sexual experience: "For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his body, but the wife does" (1 Cor. 7:4). The whole sentence describes Eve's punishment for her transgression, which involves subsequent generations in the same way that Adam's sin does (Rom. 5). Subjection is the result of the fall, not of creation. And this brings us back to Gal. 3:28, for it is *in Christ* that the effects of the fall are removed. He who did away with the curse of Adam also removes the curse of Eve. The Redeemer rescues the woman as he does the man. Too many of us try to go on living in the old age where the Second Adam's work is not felt. Our attitude toward women often betrays an obtuseness to the fact that God has broken into history. "Man's historic treatment of woman, due to his conceit, ignorance or moral perversion, has taken her inferiority for granted, and has thus necessitated it by her enslavement and degradation" (Dwight M. Pratt, *ISBE*, V, 3100). Thus we frustrate the grace of God. □