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Hermeneutical Gerrymandering: Hurley on Women and Authority

by David M. Scholer

Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective
by James B. Hurley (Zondervan, 1981, 288 pp., \$6.95).

Since 1979 at least three major books have appeared in the United States which undertake an examination of the New Testament and conclude against the ordination of women and the participation of women in authoritative leadership and teaching positions within the Church. In 1979 Susan T. Foh's *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* appeared (Presbyterian and Reformed; reprinted by Baker in 1980) followed in 1980 by Stephen B. Clark's extensive study *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Servant Books, reviewed in *TSF Bulletin*, September–October 1981). These books have had a relatively wide hearing and influence already. It seems, however, that strong proponents of Foh's book and its position often fail to see the irony, even the inconsistency, of the teaching function that her book has had among many men opposed to women teachers in the Church!

Published more recently has been the impressive book by James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*. Hurley is Associate Professor of Theology and Director of Studies at Westminster Theological Seminary's Miami, Florida Study Center. He has written what is undoubtedly the most able and thorough biblical study to date which

Hurley assumes that all "real" authority is lodged only with "appointive male headship."

takes a position against ordination or authoritative teaching and leadership roles for women in the Church. Hurley has a Ph.D. in New Testament from Cambridge University, and his scholarship pervades and informs the book. Without doubt, the book will have a wide hearing among those struggling with the issues involved.

Hurley's book is thorough and generally well organized. The first three chapters survey women in the Old Testament and its environment, in Judaism and in Graeco-Roman culture. After a chapter on women in Jesus' ministry and teaching, Hurley has four thematic chapters on women in the life of the apostolic church, in marriage, in worship and in church office. A concluding chapter provides a summary and several case studies for applying his conclusions. Hurley also has a detailed appendix on veiling practices in ancient Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures.

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Nevertheless, having studied these issues for nearly fifteen years in both church and academic settings, I am deeply committed to the position that God calls both women and men into authoritative leadership and teaching positions within the Church, and so I disagree with Hurley's conclusions. I wish to organize my dialogue with Hurley's book and the position it represents in terms of four broad areas. I believe these are critical to a responsible discussion of the issues which divide us: (1) the significance and use of the cultural context of the New Testament; (2) the nature and structure of authoritative teaching and leadership in biblical texts; (3) the matter of integration among the various New Testament passages on the issue; and (4) the nature of the exegetical evidence itself. Although a detailed counterpoint to Hurley's book is not possible in a brief article, I hope this analysis provides a helpful indication concerning how a thorough critique would be formulated.

The Cultural Context

Persons arguing against ordination and authoritative roles for women in the Church have traditionally paid inadequate attention to the status of women in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultural milieus of the New Testament writings. While the hermeneutical questions concerning cultural influences on New Testament writers are complex, it is undeniable that God's revelation took place in particular historical contexts. Any "docetic" approach to the New Testament must be rejected. Although the cultural data does not *determine* the meaning of any New Testament text, no responsible interpretation can avoid careful dialogue with it.

Hurley's book formally states a sound approach to such hermeneutically sensitive exegesis. Hurley does provide much more extensive engagement with these issues than his ideological predecessors. However, in the seventy-eight pages given to the cultural context of the New Testament, the Graeco-Roman world receives not even three pages of discussion. This is inadequate, failing to take seriously enough the widespread convictions about the inferiority of women and their typical exclusion from public roles in Graeco-Roman society. The unfortunate result is that Hurley's cultural data is not "up front" for the discussion of the Pauline and Petrine texts which are addressed to believers whose churches are dynamic communities in that Graeco-Roman world. Even with Hurley's extensive and much more careful treatment of the Jewish milieu the problem of exegetical-hermeneutical integration remains. Hurley cites, for example, some crucial texts from Sirach, Josephus and Philo which show a very negative attitude toward any public participation by women. Hurley does draw a contrast between the attitude represented by such texts and that of Jesus portrayed in the gospels, but he does not dialogue with the implications of these texts during his discussions of particular New Testament passages (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:33–36). Thus, readers—especially traditional evangelical ones—are not forced to struggle with the deeper issues of New Testament interpretation. They might still be able to read biblical texts as if they had not been written within particular contexts.

The Nature of Authoritative Teaching

Perhaps the most basic issue, however, is that Hurley makes an assumption which is not, in my judgment, exegetically sound or in tune with a complete biblical theology. Hurley assumes that all "real" authority is lodged only with "appointive male headship." This presumptive structure then simply controls the argument and details of his whole book. Some examples should make this issue clear.

In Hurley's Old Testament discussion, the female prophet Huldah (see 2 Kings 22:11-20; 2 Chronicles 34:19-28) receives only a brief comment, at which point she is called a "spokesman" for God, and she is not mentioned in his summary of the Old Testament data. The presumption that "real" authority resided only in certain appointed male elders means that Hurley does not seriously confront the implications of Huldah as an authoritative prophet. Huldah is a married woman who speaks God's reliable and authoritative word to King Josiah. It is clear in the text that Huldah was, before Josiah's inquiry for the word of the Lord, a recognized and established prophet. To exclude Huldah from "real" authority strikes me as reading a structure into the text.

Hurley describes at length the gospel data on women who participated in witness and proclamation, both during Jesus' ministry and in connection with his resurrection. Nevertheless, he virtually dismisses this data, because such women were not part of the "official appointive authority structure." Of course not; Hurley has already limited that structure to men only! True, there were no women among the Twelve and Jesus did not talk about bishops, presbyters and deacons, as does 1-2 Timothy. But to conclude from that evidence that Jesus was not concerned with authoritative teaching and structure among his followers is a *non sequitur*. Although the Samaritan woman and the women who proclaimed Jesus' resurrection to men do not fit the church order concepts of the Pastoral Epistles, they are no less authority figures from the perspective of the gospel texts.

The numerous women mentioned by name in Philippians 4:2-3 and Romans 16:1-16—Euodia, Syntyche, Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Persis, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Junia—are placed by Hurley in a section of the book he calls "Women in the Organized Ministries of the Church." This appears innocent enough, but what it does is to separate this data, without adequate discussion, from the chapter entitled "Women and Men in Church Office," which is limited only to 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Not only is the exegetical treatment of Philippians 4 and Romans 16 inadequate (see below), but also the very organization of the material offered by Hurley precludes the possibility that these women had genuine teaching and leadership authority in the Church.

Further, Hurley's assumptions about the nature and locus of authority lead him to contextual and hermeneutical inconsistencies, I believe, in his discussion of 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Hurley believes that the prohibition in this text is applicable to a particular structure of authority. Thus, the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 against women teaching and having authority over men is, for Hurley, a prohibition against participation by women in official appointive authority structures. Thus, his case studies allow, for example, women to teach men "authoritatively" in a mission situation so long as they are not "officially appointed elders." Or, a woman may teach in a Sunday morning worship service so long as she is an occasional teacher and understood to be distinguished from an elder (= male) who teaches. While there is considerable diversity in the forms, offices and structures of teaching and authority described in the New Testament, there is, in my judgment, no basis for distinguishing between or among qualitatively different types of authoritative ministry. The criterion of acceptable authority in New Testament texts is conformity and faithfulness to apostolic tradition, not the sex of the person.

Integration among New Testament Passages

In the construction of a biblical theology based on the New Testament, one important issue concerns the balance between various texts. Hurley's position is strongly influenced by the choice he makes concerning which text will provide the "window" through which other texts must be interpreted.

Hurley clearly makes 1 Timothy 2:18-15 the determinative text by which all other texts—including the gospels, Galatians 3:28, Philippians 4:2-3, Romans 16:1-16, 1 Corinthians 11:5—are ultimately evaluated. Any interpretation which correlates different New Testament passages will tend to have "control" or "perspective" texts. What must be made

clear, however, is that the texts themselves do not tell us which passages should exercise control; we, the interpreters, make those decisions. Hurley virtually assumes that 1 Timothy 2 will be a "control" text simply because the Pastors are concerned with church order in an explicit and obvious manner. However, all New Testament texts polemicize, to one degree or another, for what they perceive to be the true and faithful representation of the gospel. It cannot be taken for granted that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 "controls" the evidence of other Pauline texts. It is just as defensible—for me, more defensible—to argue that the evidence of women's participation in authoritative teaching and leadership (as indicated, for example, in 1 Cor. 11:5, Phil. 4:2-3 and Rom. 16:1-18) "controls" 1 Timothy 2:8-15. That is, these passages, along with other data, provide evidence that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 speaks to a particular, limited problem of heresy in Ephesus addressed by 1 and 2 Timothy.

Exegetical Issues

The last remark introduces the whole matter of exegesis. Careful and responsible exegesis is crucial for those who accept scriptural authority and the sound hermeneutical principle that the correct interpretation of a text—on which hermeneutical application and obedience are predicated—is found in the original author's intended meaning. The exegetical evidence gleaned from the texts themselves becomes the court of appeal from which the dialogue concerning women in the Church can advance. Of course, only a few examples of exegetical debate can be covered here.

Galatians 3:28 is, of course, a much-discussed text. Hurley, and others representing his position, stress—correctly—that the context in Galatians concerns the fact that God's justification in Christ is not predicated on any human status, heritage or even biological distinction. Hurley argues that Galatians 3:28 does not remove "distinctions," especially sexual ones. He notes the instructions to slaves and masters in Ephesians 6:5-9 as an illustration of this point. However, Hurley does not note, for example, how Philemon 15-17 implies a dramatic alteration of such categories in Christ. Further, Hurley does not adequately reckon with the sociological impact of Paul's use in first-century society of precisely these three pairs—slave/free, Jew/Gentile, male/female. Because these examples represented the oppressive structures of that society, which the gospel was intended to reverse, they necessarily imply that in Christ, which is to say in the Church, these actual distinc-

The participation of women in authoritative leadership, as indicated by Pauline texts, is evidence that 1 Timothy 2 speaks for a particular, limited heresy.

tions do not determine status or function. F. F. Bruce argues, in fact, in his new commentary on Galatians (Eerdmans, 1982), that this is so clearly the import of Galatians 3:28 that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 ought to be interpreted in its light.

I am convinced that the data concerning the women named in Philippians 4:2-3 and Romans 16:1-16 is crucial for a proper interpretation of Paul's stance on the place of women in the Church (see my article, "Paul's Women Co-Workers in the Ministry of the Church," *Daughters of Sarah* 6:4 [July/August 1980], 3-6). In my judgment, Hurley's less than six pages on these texts constitutes an indefensible neglect of important evidence. For example, consider his treatment of Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2-3. Hurley's eight lines focus primarily on their quarrel. While acknowledging that these women were important in the Church and quoting Paul's words that they "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel," the full significance of the data is not mentioned. They are classed as "fellow workers" (*sunergoi*), a term Paul uses frequently (as Hurley does note) for men—Urbanus, Timothy, Titus,

Epaphroditus, Clement, Philemon, Demas, Luke, Apollos and himself—who certainly did exercise genuine authority in teaching and leadership. It is further noted by Paul that Euridia and Syntyche worked in the gospel *together with* Clement. It is clear to me that the natural reading of this text means that these two women participated in authoritative teaching and/or leadership in the gospel.

So much could, and should, be said about Romans 16. Phoebe is called a *diakonos*, which certainly does not here mean “deacon” in the sense of 1 Timothy 3 (as Hurley would seem to agree). However, Paul’s use of *diakonos*, apart from the technical “deacon” sense, means a minister of the gospel. He uses this term for himself, Christ, Apollos, Epaphras, Timothy and Tychichus. Again, the clearest meaning of Romans 16:1–2 is that Phoebe is the “minister,” that is, the authoritative leader, of the Church in Cenchrea.

In his discussion of Romans 16:7 Hurley concludes that “to use Junias, who may be male or female, as an example of a ‘woman preacher’ or ‘woman elder’ would be irresponsible.” *Au contraire*. There is no indication from ancient Greek evidence that Junia(s) was ever a man’s name. Hurley does not let the reader know this, nor that the fourth-century church Father, John Chrysostom (no friend of women in church leadership), understood Junia as a woman, nor that it was not until the twelfth century that any commentator saw Junia(s) as a man! In addition, Hurley’s discussion of the term “apostle,” applied by Paul to Junia, underrates the sense of authority and leadership involved in apostleship in the New Testament. Contrary to Hurley, I believe responsible exegesis finds Junia to be an example of a woman who exercised teaching and leadership authority in the early Church.

Several other Pauline texts also need attention. Hurley correctly notes that 1 Corinthians 11:5 indicates that women did prophesy within the Pauline churches. However, Hurley’s attempt to deny that prophecy was genuinely authoritative teaching is, in my judgment, ill-conceived. My reading of 1 Corinthians 14:1–25 indicates clearly that Paul considered prophecy authoritative teaching on which the edification of the church depended. I find it telling that Hurley apparently ignores 1 Corinthians 14:3 in his definition of Paul’s understanding of prophecy, and that he does not actually use 1 Corinthians 14:1–25 in any significant discussion.

Hurley’s “low” view of prophecy is critical for his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. Here his interpretation is heavily dependent upon an interpretation, shared by very few scholars, which holds that this text’s prohibition on women speaking refers only to the official evaluation of prophets. In other words, women may prophesy (less than genuinely authoritative speech), but they may not judge prophecy (genuinely authoritative speech). I do not find this distinction to be supported at all in 1 Corinthians or anywhere in Paul. Although the text is difficult to interpret, two aspects seem quite clear. First, the context is concerned with decency and order. Injunctions to silence for the sake of order are found in 1 Corinthians 14:28 and 14:30 as well as 14:34. Second, the phrase, “if there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home” (14:35), has an obvious and natural sense entirely apart

from any issue of authoritative teaching. It seems to refer to disorderly questions which women, generally uneducated in that culture, may have been prone to ask during worship. From my perspective, then, Hurley’s discussion of 1 Corinthians 14 unnecessarily imposes on the text a distinction about authority and fails to present adequately other options for understanding it.

1 Timothy 2:8–15 will probably always generate the greatest discussion: Hurley devotes nearly thirty pages to this one text. He both assumes and argues for the position that the instructions about women in 1 Timothy 2:11–12 are “timeless” and transcend any local or limited historical situation. Indeed such a stance does need to be argued, for it ought not be assumed. Many evangelical and other scholars have presented a very defensible case that 1 Timothy 2:11–12 relates to a limited problem of heretical abuse in Ephesus (for a very brief summary of my case see “Exegesis: 1 Timothy 2:8–15,” *Daughters of Sarah* 1:4 [May 1975], 7–8; see also Mark Roberts’ article, “Women Shall Be Saved: A Closer Look at 1 Timothy 2:15,” *TSF Bulletin*, November–December 1981).

The context of the Pastoral Epistles suggests very strongly that the heresy opposed by Paul here was centered in particular on women (see 1 Tim. 4:3; 5:11–15; 2 Tim. 3:6–7). In view of the evidence elsewhere in Paul (noted above) that women did, in fact, participate in the authoritative teaching and leadership ministry of the Church, it makes excellent sense to see 1 Timothy 2:11–12 as limited to this particular problem of heresy. This interpretation is enhanced by Paul’s use of an unusual, even rare, word for “authority” in 2:12. There is very strong evidence that *authentein* should be taken as an indication of the heretical, illegitimate authority which the women taken in by the false teachers (3:6–7) are bringing to the church. Further, Paul’s rationale in 2:13–14 does not *ipso facto* make 2:11–12 a timeless, universal injunction—any more than Paul’s utilization of Genesis in 1 Corinthians 11:7–9 forever mandates head coverings for women when praying or prophesying. Paul is able to use selective argumentation from his Jewish heritage. Finally, if 1 Timothy 2:8–15 is “timeless,” why not 1 Timothy 5:3–16 as well? This extended passage about widows, containing numerous explicit injunctions, is mentioned only very briefly by Hurley, yet on the basis of his argument about the purpose of 1 Timothy would seem equally binding (and even more precise in its requirements). I certainly am not arguing for a return to a literalistic application of 1 Timothy 5:3–16, but I am calling for a deep level of hermeneutical honesty and consistency in using 1 Timothy in the church today.

My passion is to stimulate exacting exegetical work and rigorous hermeneutical discussion. Further, I believe faithfulness to biblical teaching means clear support for any person, woman or man, whom God calls to teach or lead with the authority of Christ’s gospel in the church today. Dialogue, as good conversations, never end, but they should be refreshing, stimulating and challenging in the best possible sense. May this dialogue in Christ’s Church be such edification.

THE CHURCH & PEACEMAKING IN THE NUCLEAR AGE: A CONFERENCE ON BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

This conference, to be held May 25–28, 1983 in Pasadena, California, will provide the first opportunity for a large representative group of evangelical Church leaders to meet to address the nuclear arms race. The unique emphasis of this national conference is its balanced educational approach. Many responses to the issue will be presented by leading evangelical voices of different Christian traditions. An unprecedented coalition of over fifty evangelical organizations, including Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, has initiated this church-wide event. An additional thirty groups are contributing to the diversity of the conference by providing in excess of one hundred practical and technical workshops to some two thousand participants on a first come/first served basis. In America, many churches have taken an active role in the nuclear arms discussion. Until now, however, evangelical participation has been minimal. This conference could prove to be a major watershed in evangelical thought regarding faith issues raised by the nuclear weapons buildup. For more information contact Jim Brenneman, The Church and Peacemaking in the Nuclear Age, 1539 E. Howard St., Pasadena, CA 91104.

EXTENSION ON FREE BOOK OFFER

In the January/February 1983 issue (page 29), we offered free books to those who obtain new subscriptions for *TSF Bulletin*. We are extending the deadline for this program until June 1, 1983. In addition to showing your own copies to classmates, another possible strategy may be to set up a table in a lounge or refectory. In this way, you can help others learn about *TSF Bulletin* while receiving free books for your labors. You will also be helping us gain needed subscribers.

EUROPEAN THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS CONFERENCE

The International Fellowship of Evangelical Students will be holding a conference for theological students at Schloss Mittersill, Austria, August 6–13, 1983. The theme will be “God’s People in God’s World.” Lectures, seminars and practical sessions will explore the relationship between the Christian, the Church and the world, considering our individual and corporate responsibilities in the wider society. The main speaker will be Samuel Escobar (Peru), the IFES Associate General Secretary in Latin America. Although the conference is aimed primarily at European students, some American delegates will be admitted. The registration deadline is May 31, 1983. For more information write either Schloss Mittersill, A-5730 Mittersill, Land Salzburg, Austria; or Dr. Jim Stamooolis, IFES Theological Students’ Secretary, 154 Frothingham Ave., Jeannette, PA 15644.