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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH: A SURVEY OF CURRENT APPROACHES

CARL B. HOCH, JR.

Three major approaches to the question of the role of women in the church can be discerned in contemporary Western Christianity: the non-evangelical egalitarian, the evangelical egalitarian, and the hierarchical. The first approach does not accept the Bible as the authoritative guide to faith and practice, viewing Scripture as androcentric and thus to be handled with hermeneutical suspicion. The second position accepts the Bible as the infallible standard of faith and ethics, but holds that the texts used by traditionalists to keep women in a limited role of ministry have been misunderstood. Most such texts are considered historically-conditioned ad hoc passages that are not universally applicable to current ecclesiology. The third position affirms that Scripture teaches a hierarchy for the home and the church. Role differentiation, however, is not seen to imply that there is an ontological difference between male and female; the two are essentially equal while maintaining different roles in a functional hierarchy.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

THE role of women in the church is rapidly becoming one of the most controversial issues in western Christianity. Numerous books and articles have appeared on the subject in the last five years, and there is scarcely a major Christian publisher that has not published at least one work on the issue. A recent volume lists approximately 430 titles.¹ This same book cites three bibliographies on the subject.²

¹G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

²C. E. Cerling, Jr., "An Annotated Bibliography of the New Testament Teaching about Women," *JETS* 16 (1972) 47-53; D. M. Scholer, *Introductory Reading List for*

There are three major approaches to the role of women reflected in the literature: non-evangelical egalitarian, evangelical egalitarian, and hierarchical. This article examines each of these views and suggests areas where further research may resolve the differences or at least bring a sharper focus on the exact nature of the role of women in the church according to each position.

THE NON-EVANGELICAL EGALITARIAN APPROACH

The most concise recent presentation of the non-evangelical egalitarian approach is that edited by Collins.³ This viewpoint rejects the Bible as an absolute, timeless revelation.⁴ The biblical texts are sexist and thoroughly androcentric,⁵ requiring a "hermeneutics of suspicion." The androcentric texts are "theological interpretations, argumentations, projections, and selections rooted in a patriarchal culture."⁶ Therefore, the texts must be read critically and evaluated historically in terms of their own time. However, the theological assessment may take one of five forms according to Osiek.⁷

The rejectionist asserts that the Bible is of no value for constructing a theology of women. The entire Judeo-Christian tradition is hopelessly sinful, corrupt, and unredeemable.⁸

The loyalist maintains that the Bible may be interpreted as really teaching freedom and equality of all persons. Biblical texts teaching female submission are not the norm and must be interpreted in line with the norms of freedom and equality.

The revisionist calls for a total reassessment of the role of women in Judaism and in early Christianity. This approach is a midpoint between the first and second viewpoints.

The sublimationist employs a search for and glorification of the eternal feminine in biblical symbolism. This symbolism establishes the distinctive feminine and masculine modes of being.

The liberationist interprets biblical eschatology in terms of liberation. The task of the church should be the progressive liberation of women from patriarchal domination. The core of the biblical message

the Study of the Role and Status of Women in the New Testament (David Scholer, 1981) 1-4; K. Sorrie, "Contemporary Feminist Theology: A Selective Bibliography," *TSF Bulletin* 7 (1984) 13-15.

³A. Y. Collins, ed., *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1985).

⁴*Ibid.*, 3.

⁵*Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁶*Ibid.*, 56.

⁷C. Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in Collins, *Feminist Perspectives*, 97-105.

⁸*Ibid.*, 98.

is to be found in the prophetic tradition which calls for the creation of a just society free from any kind of oppression.⁹

While the non-evangelical egalitarian approach continues to regard the Bible as a religious document, it often does not uphold the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. It employs the historical-critical method for adjudicating which texts are acceptable for developing a theology of women and which texts are unacceptable. In the final analysis, contemporary feminism serves as a judge of the Bible; the Bible cannot serve as the judge of contemporary feminism.

THE EVANGELICAL EGALITARIAN APPROACH

This second approach affirms the Bible as the infallible rule of faith and practice. Evangelical egalitarians do not have a hostile or even negative view of the Bible. They do, however, believe that hierarchicalists have misused the texts that seem to support a hierarchy that limits the kinds of ministry women may perform in the church. The Bible does not, according to this approach, teach a man/woman hierarchy nor a submission of women/wives to men/husbands. The true biblical picture, especially from the perspective of the NT, is complete equality between male and female and mutual submission of male and female in Christ. There is a strong emphasis on giving full weight to the cultural conditioning of parts of Scripture and on paying close attention to the historically conditioned *ad hoc* passages.

One of the factors that has certainly caused the first and second approaches to appear so attractive has been the extension of the hierarchical view to politics, economics, business, suffrage, dress, the right to author books, the chairing of meetings, and countless other areas of everyday life. If the hierarchicalist approach demands lower wages for women, denies the right of women to wear slacks and pants-suits, and denounces women who run for political office, then feminists have a legitimate right to reject the hierarchicalist approach as demeaning to women and as a reduction of a woman's status to something less than being made in God's image.

Actually, there is wide agreement between evangelical egalitarians and hierarchicalists in regard to a woman's place in society, home, and church. Both affirm women as made in the image of God. Neither teaches an ontological hierarchy of male and female. Both agree that a woman's role in the home and in the church is to a large degree culturally defined. Both acknowledge the significant contributions women have made in biblical history and in the modern world. Both take note of the place of women in the life of Christ as recorded in

⁹Ibid., 103.

the Gospels and of the high esteem Jesus Christ placed on women. Both insist that there are many clear passages in the NT where women have a significant part in church life: women prayed (Acts 1:14), prophesied (Acts 2:17-18; 21:8-9), engaged in benevolent work (Acts 9:36-43), hosted meetings of the church (Acts 12:12; 16:40; 1 Cor 1:11; 16:19; Col 4:15), were fellow-workers with the apostle Paul (Rom 16:3-5; Phil 4:2-4), worked hard in the Lord (Rom 16:2, 12), taught younger women (Titus 2:3-5), washed the feet of saints (1 Tim 5:9-10), and at least in one case corrected a male's deficient theology privately (Acts 18:26).

Both emphasize the giving of spiritual gifts to every member of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7). No one denies that women sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19) or evangelized (John 4:39-42). Therefore, most agree that 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12 cannot command the absolute silence of women in the church.

The conflict between egalitarians and hierarchicalists revolves around six or seven controversial passages in the NT and the extent of male/female equality. Feminists argue that there is to be a complete equality of men and women in all spheres of life. There are no leaders or heads. There are neither offices from which women are excluded nor limitations of ministry to be placed upon women. All ministries in the church are open to women and mutual submission is to characterize male/female relationships in the home and in the church. Evangelical egalitarians have maintained this position based on their interpretation of texts that have been bastions for hierarchicalists who maintain an ontological equality but a functional hierarchy between men and women and an exclusion of women from the office of teaching and/or ruling elder.

The first debated text is Rom 16:1. Egalitarians assert that Phoebe was a deaconess in the church at Cenchreae. The service she performed was official and reflects the male/female equality in the apostolic church.

The second debated text is Rom 16:7. Egalitarians argue that Ἰουνιᾶν is a feminine form and refers to a woman named Junia. She is not only called a fellow-prisoner (συναιχμαλώτος) with Paul, but more significantly, she is designated as outstanding among the apostles. It is said that there can be no doubt from this text that there were woman apostles in the early church.

The third controversial passage is 1 Cor 11:2-16. Since some kind of head-covering is mentioned, egalitarians are quick to point out the need to take seriously the cultural dimensions of various NT directives. But more attention is directed toward the meaning of κεφαλή in v 3. Egalitarians insist that this word means "source" or "origin," and that attempts to establish a hierarchy on the basis of this verse are misguided.

The fourth debated passage is 1 Cor 14:34–35. All sides admit the difficulty in understanding just what the problem was at Corinth and what the Pauline response to the problem was. The exegetical difficulties are: (1) Does the phrase “as in all the churches of the saints” go with v 33 or with v 34? (2) Does αἱ γυναῖκες mean “your women” or “your wives”? (3) Is the prohibition against speaking a prohibition against speaking in tongues, speaking across a divided aisle, speaking or praying as a prophetess (if this option is adopted, 11:5 is usually interpreted as allowing praying or prophesying only for the sake of argument, but not in fact allowing either practice), brash speaking, teaching, or all speaking? (4) Where is the passage “in the law”? (5) Why is it shameful for a woman to speak in the church? The solutions here are not uniform. Some argue for a textual interpolation; others for an admonition against judging prophets publicly; others for a Gnostic background of female chauvinism; and others for a quotation by Paul of a legalistic slogan being used by Jewish propagandists to promote male chauvinism in the Corinthian assembly. Although the verses are obscure, they are, according to the egalitarians, to be recognized as an *ad hoc* passage. The exegete must use considerable care before raising a text above time-bound significance to timeless significance.

The fifth controversial text is Gal 3:28. All egalitarians regard this verse as the “Magna Carta” of feminism. Along with Acts 2:17–18 it can be considered as an inaugural text. Gal 3:28 is considered to be *the normative text*. All other texts must be interpreted so as to cohere with this text. Egalitarian exegetes stoutly maintain that this verse teaches the complete equality of men and women in the church. According to Bilezikian, “sex distinctions are irrelevant in the church. Therefore, the practice of sex discrimination in the church is sinful.”¹⁰

The sixth debated passage is 1 Tim 2:11–15. There are few passages in the NT that have produced as much controversy. All approaches regard it as a *crux interpretum*. It is a pillar passage for hierarchicalists. It is a problem passage for egalitarians. It has been dubbed non-Pauline by those rejecting the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals. Some feel that it represents “Paul in process” where he has not yet worked out consistently the implications of his basic theology as expressed in Gal 3:28. Gordon Fee has recently argued that this is an *ad hoc* passage addressing a particular problem in the church at Ephesus.¹¹ The passage, then, is of particular, not universal significance.¹²

¹⁰Bilezikian, *Sex Roles*, 128.

¹¹G. Fee, “Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, With Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents,” *JETS* 28 (1985) 141–51.

¹²G. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Good News Commentary; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) 141–51.

The seventh debated text is 1 Tim 3:11. The Greek text simply reads γυναῖκας ὡσαύτως after the three verses (vv 8–10) that outline the qualifications for deacons. The exegetical question is whether deaconesses or the wives of deacons are in view. While some hierarchicalists concede that deaconesses may be the subject, the usual approach is to interpret the γυναῖκας as the wives of deacons. Neither this passage nor Rom 16:1 describes women as holding the office of deaconess according to many hierarchicalists. Phoebe is a “servant” and the γυναῖκας assist their husbands in their roles as deacons. Egalitarians, on the other hand, use this text to support their exegesis of Rom 16:1, or they use Rom 16:1 as support for a deaconess as the subject of 1 Tim 3:11.

According to evangelical egalitarians, then, none of these seven controversial texts undermines or subverts a doctrine of complete equality of men and women in the church: Gal 3:28 is the basic, inaugural text; 1 Corinthians 11 does not teach a hierarchy; Rom 16:1, 7 and 1 Tim 3:11 show that women held high offices in the primitive church (deaconess and apostle); and 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–15 are *ad hoc* passages addressing particular problems in the churches of Corinth and Ephesus, and are not universal, timeless texts.

THE HIERARCHICALIST APPROACH

Hierarchicalists reaffirm the position of traditional Judaism and Christianity that God has determined a functional hierarchy in the home and in the church. There is a role differentiation between male and female. Males are to lead and females are to follow in church government. Only men are eligible for the office of teaching and ruling elder. In the home, although husbands are to love their wives, wives are to submit themselves to their husbands (Eph 5:22, 24; Col 3:18). Oppressive husbands and autocratic males in leadership roles are reprehensible, but this does not invalidate the biblical directives.

Hierarchicalists differ over whether Rom 16:1 and 1 Tim 3:11 are describing deaconesses. Although the majority of them support the servant/wives of deacons interpretation, such an interpretation is not necessary to their approach. Hierarchicalists do not argue that women have no ministry in the church. The office of deaconess may have been a legitimate ministry in NT times. There is no pronoun after γυναῖκας, and Paul does not have a separate section on the wives of overseers after his discussion of the overseers themselves in vv 1–7. These facts argue against a separate section on wives of deacons. When Paul uses ὡσαύτως, it usually introduces a separate group (cf. 1 Tim 2:9; 3:8, 11; Titus 2:3, 6). The NT apparently did not have a

separate word for "deaconess."¹³ Therefore, the office of deaconess is exegetically possible. The hierarchical approach is not adversely affected if women serve as deaconesses in the church.

However, hierarchicalists refuse to acknowledge that Ἰουνῖαν is a feminine name. The possibility from a purely lexical point of view that this is a woman's name is probably ruled out by the context.¹⁴ The form is probably a short form of the common Junianus.¹⁵

Even if Ἰουνῖαν is a woman's name and she is outstanding, she may not actually have been an apostle. The Greek preposition ἐν is fluid enough to allow a person to be among a group without being an integral part of that group.

A pillar in the egalitarian position is the meaning of κεφαλή in 1 Cor 11:3-5 as "source" or "origin." The Mickelsens assert that no superior rank or authority connotations can be read into κεφαλή.¹⁶ Grudem, however, states that κεφαλή never means "source" or "origin" in Greek literature.¹⁷ Two possible examples of this meaning (Herodotus 4.91 and the *Orphic Fragments* 21a), upon closer examination, yield the meanings "top" and "beginning of a series."¹⁸ Grudem's conclusion is: "If we are interested in biblical interpretation that is based on the facts of historical and linguistic research, then it would seem wise to give up once for all the claim that *kephale* can mean 'source.'"¹⁹ Hierarchicalists, therefore, affirm their belief that the NT teaches an authority structure where the man does have a priority in leadership in the church and in the home over the woman.

Hierarchicalists are as perplexed over Paul's intention in 1 Cor 14:34-35 as the egalitarians are. The usual approach is to compare the vocabulary parallels with 1 Timothy 2 and to conclude that authoritative speaking, teaching, and ruling are forbidden.²⁰ An alternative view is that women are forbidden to participate in the (public) examination of prophets.²¹ Since the passage is obscure, nothing

¹³J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953; reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 83-84.

¹⁴BAGD, s.v. "Ἰουνῖας," II. Cf. Hans Lietzmann, *Die Briefe des Apostels Paulus* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament; Tubingen: Mohr, 1910) n.p.

¹⁵BAGD, s.v. "Ἰουνῖας," II.

¹⁶Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen, "What Does *Kephale* Mean in the New Testament?" in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986) 97-110.

¹⁷W. Grudem, "Appendix One: Does *Kephale* ('Head') Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples," in G. W. Knight III, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 68.

¹⁸Ibid., 53.

¹⁹Ibid., 70.

²⁰Ibid., 34.

²¹J. B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 193.

dogmatic can be based on it. But it is looked upon as cohering with 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 in terms of female subordination in the church.

Hierarchicalists firmly reject the thesis that Gal 3:28 teaches complete functional equality between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and masters, or male and female. They believe that Paul is affirming soteriological equality. The whole argument of Galatians is whether works of the law such as circumcision are necessary in order for Gentiles to be saved. The issue in Galatians is soteriological. The argument is over entrance into the church, not ministry within it. It is no more legitimate to use Gal 3:28 to teach absolute equality of all the race in Christ than it is to use Col 1:20 to teach universalism. Authority structures and functional differences are simply not in view in Gal 3:28.

The pillar passage for the hierarchical view is 1 Tim 2:11–15 just as Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 11:3–5 are pillar passages for egalitarians. 1 Tim 2:11–15 is not an interpolation. It occurs within a genuine epistle of Paul. It is absolute, universal, and timeless in its prescriptive character as the Word of God. Although there may be a necessary cultural adjustment over precisely how a woman might exercise authority over a man, a woman is to be in submission to a man in the church. The woman is forbidden to indoctrinate the church in matters of faith and practice. This passage must be interpreted in light of other NT texts where verbal activity of women in the church is described and approved. Therefore, the word ἡσυχία cannot mean total silence. It either means silence in respect to authoritative teaching or an attitude of reverence and respect (see 2 Thess 3:12; and cf. ἡσύχιος in 1 Tim 2:2 and 1 Pet 3:4). The term ἀθηντεύω simply means “exercise authority over.”²² It is not assuming rebellious women who are seeking to dominate. Paul grounds his argument in the first three chapters of Genesis, not in Jewish or Graeco-Roman cultural practices.²³ The parallels between this passage and 1 Pet 3:1–7 indicate that this passage cannot be *ad hoc*. Therefore, 1 Tim 2:11–15 places a limitation upon women: they are not eligible for the office of teaching and/or ruling elder. Their eligibility would violate the hierarchy and transgress the prohibitions against authoritative teaching.

CONCLUSION

While there are points of agreement among the three approaches to the role of women in the church, there are also sharp disagreements. At stake is the ministry of women in the church. Every effort,

²²G. W. Knight III, “AUTHENTEO in Reference to Women in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *NTS* 30 (1984) 143–57.

²³Hurley, *Man and Woman*, 204–23.

therefore, should be expended by those within the church to grapple with the issues in an attempt to reach a position that neither vitiates the authority of Scripture nor robs women of a vital, biblical place in the body of Christ. In this effort, the following questions need to be addressed:

1. If Grudem is correct in his study of κεφαλή, what revisions will need to be made in the egalitarian approach? If he is wrong, will the hierarchicalist position need radical reassessment?
2. Is Ἰουβίαν a masculine or feminine name? If it can be proven that she held the position of apostle in the early church, what are the implications of this fact for current church order? Are there apostles today?
3. What does it mean “to prophesy”? Is this a continuing ministry of women or should it be classified with temporary gifts and thus eliminate that ministry for women in the modern church?
4. Do women lose a significant part of ministry in the modern church where they no longer serve as hostesses for the gathering of the saints?
5. If a woman can legitimately serve as a deaconess, just what ministry can she have or not have? Did NT deacons only “serve tables”?
6. Can the hierarchy be separated from the hair-covering in I Corinthians 11? In other words, what are the hermeneutics of NT directives given in a cultural form? Are hierarchicalists consistent in insisting on one directive as absolute and the other directive as relative?
7. To what extent is there a cultural limitation on Scripture? Hermeneutically, what guidelines are there to distinguish the prescriptive Word of God from the descriptive Word of God?
8. If I Tim 2:11–15 is an *ad hoc* passage, what are the limits to declaring most of the NT *ad hoc*? Is there any authoritative “rule of faith and practice”?
9. What answers does one give to questions concerning the application of I Tim 2:11–15 in the modern church if the hierarchical approach is adopted? Is a new “Evangelical Talmud” necessary to give “Halakot” concerning where and when a woman can or cannot “teach”?
10. What spiritual gifts are the unique province of men?
11. What contributions can a woman make to theology, guidance, supervision, and organization in the church?

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