

A Biblical Look at the  
Ordination of Women  
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(with Jeffrey Todd McCormack)



Is the ordination of women to the ministry biblical? This is certainly one question which seems to have sparked considerable debate in the modern Church. While “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all,”<sup>1</sup> the biblical prohibition against the ordination of women to the office of elder or pastor is certainly not one of them. Rather, it is one of the easiest understood teachings to be gleaned from the Scriptures. God was very clear in His commands regarding this matter when He stated through the Apostle Paul:

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something,

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1. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1:7.

let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression (1 Timothy 2:11-14).

This clear prohibition has been dismissed in some professed Protestant churches today, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Christian Reformed Church, and others which have chosen to disregard God's Word and ordain women, not only as deacons and elders, but also to the pastoral ministry. And yet, such women cannot even meet the most basic qualification for this office which God has set forth in His infallible Word. According to Paul: "This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach. . . ." (1 Timothy 3:1-2) This position is reinforced in Titus 1:5-6: "[A]ppoint elders in every city as I commanded you—if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination." We see, in both listings of the qualifications of a bishop or presbyter, that the candidate must be "the husband of one wife." These offices are clearly open to men exclusively since a woman cannot fulfill this most basic qualification.

In an attempt to circumvent the intent of these verses,

many claim they reflect an outdated patriarchal culture and therefore are not applicable in our modern egalitarian society. However, such is to tread on dangerous doctrinal ground. Although there are indeed passages of Scripture which are bound to the culture of the ancient biblical people, and thus have ceased to directly apply to our own day, this is not to say that the underlying principles have also passed away. For example, at one time the ceremonial law of Moses required that the Jews not wear clothing of mixed threads (Deuteronomy 22:11; Leviticus 19:19). While the outward law no longer applies to Christians under the New Covenant, its underlying principle of segregation of unlike things certainly does. One example of this enduring principle is found in 2 Corinthians 6:14 in which believers are commanded not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers.”

However, Paul’s words regarding the qualifications for ecclesiastical office cannot be approached in this same manner. First of all, he was not writing to Israelites under the Old Covenant, but rather to Christians under the New Covenant. Therefore, the commandments which he gave cannot be relegated to the category of Old Testament “types and shadows,” but must be understood and obeyed as the very commandments of Christ Himself, speaking by His Spirit through an inspired Apostle.

Secondly, the external commandment cannot, in this case, be distinguished from its underlying principle, as was the case with the ceremonial laws. Paul’s declaration that he would not “permit a woman to teach or to have author-

ity over a man" (1 Timothy 2:12) is directly related in the next two verses to both the creation order and the historical fall of our first parents in the Garden of Eden. The subjection of women to male authority is well established throughout Scripture (Genesis 3:16; Ephesians 5:22-24) and the serpent's beguiling of Eve obviously still effects us to this day. Galatians 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") is often cited in an attempt to prove the *positional* equality of men and women within the Body of Christ, but when read in the overall context of the epistle, this verse merely references the removal of the former *covenantal* barriers imposed by the Mosaic economy and establishes full *spiritual* participation of all, regardless of race or gender, in the New Covenant. It no more obliterates the natural order between the sexes than it does between parent and child. Therefore, we must conclude that the prohibition against female church officers also remains in full force today.

Before attempting to apply the "cultural relevance" argument to any biblical teaching, we must be very careful to honestly evaluate what the Bible as a whole is saying on the subject. We must also carefully examine our own hearts to see if we have an attitude of rebellion against the revealed will of God in Scripture and are sinfully looking for a way to ignore its commands. Again, let us heed the words of the Apostle: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy

3:16). It is important to note that the Apostle declared that *all* Scripture “is profitable,” not merely those isolated texts which may be misused to support one’s personal belief system. We cannot pick and choose when it comes to obedience to God’s Word for it is an “all or nothing” affair. Indeed, it is tragic how a generation of professing Christians can be so blind to the clear teaching of Scripture, and would rather hearken to the liberal agenda of the modern feminist movement than adhere to God’s clear commandments. The Bible is foreright in its denunciation of such people as these: “They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” (Titus 1:16).

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