

The Role Of Women In The Church

(Article By James O. Baird.)

There is a great deal of confusion today as to woman's role both in the home and in the church. This uncertainty provides a good opportunity to study afresh what the Bible teaches on the subject. As the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15), it is most important that the church reflect Biblical truth about woman's role.

HOW JESUS DEALT WITH WOMEN

A good place to begin a study of woman's role in the church is with the earthly ministry of Jesus. We understand, of course, the church did not begin while Jesus was on earth (Matthew 16:18), but after He ascended into Heaven (Mark 9:1; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4). Nevertheless, we can learn something about women's role in the church by studying how Jesus considered them during His earthly ministry.

We know that none of the apostles were women (Matthew 10:2-4). However, some of Jesus' closest disciples were women. Luke 8:2-3 mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and "*many others*" who helped provide financial support for Jesus and the apostles as they went about preaching. Later, when the apostles fled the crucifixion scene in fear, certain faithful and sorrowing women remained to watch his death on the cross (Matthew 27:55-56).

From these and other references in the Gospels we learn that Jesus in no way dealt with women as being inferior to men as far as being His disciples was concerned. In selecting men rather than women to be His apostles, He did make some distinction in the roles men and women should fill. These two basic principles, i.e., **(1)** equality of worth in Christ's sight, and **(2)** difference in role assignments for men and women, were clearly taught in the early church, and should, of course, be reflected in the church today.

WOMAN'S ROLE IN THE CHURCH

When the church began on the Day of Pentecost, women, as well as men, came into it in great numbers (Acts 5:14). There were no distinctions made in conditions of membership between the sexes. Furthermore, the importance of women to the whole church is reflected by the concern which the early church had for widows who needed care and help (Acts 6:1-6).

The good works of women are frequently mentioned in Scripture. Dorcas is cited as an example of faithful, loving service (Acts 9:36-39). Lydia is revealed as being a woman of great hospitality, "*constraining*" Paul and his company to abide in her house (Acts 16:1-15). Phoebe is described as a "*servant of the church that is in Cenchrea*" (Romans 16:1). The many good works of women in the church is further reflected as Paul describes the qualifications for women who were to devote full time to Christian

work and to be supported by the church. In 1 Timothy 5:9-10 these qualifications included widowhood, being sixty or more years of age, having no kin of their own to support them, and being "*well reported of for good works.*" These good works were then stated as **(1)** bringing up children, **(2)** showing hospitality to strangers, **(3)** washing the saints' feet, **(4)** relieving the afflicted, and **(5)** diligently following every good work.

Woman's role in the private teaching of God's Word is also referenced in Scripture. In Acts 18:26 Priscilla, with her husband, Aquila, privately taught a good, but misinformed preacher (Apollos) "*the way of God more accurately.*" Titus 2:4 commands older women to train younger women in Christian living.

A key verse in understanding the importance of women in the eyes of God is Galatians 3:28: "*There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female, for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus.*" In the world of Jesus' day, there were sharp distinctions among people by which they looked upon each other as inferior or superior and, because of these differences, separated themselves from each other. These differences included religious background (Jew and Greek), special status (slave or slave owner), or sex (male and female). Paul wrote that none of these distinctions was valid as far as worth is concerned. He did not mean, certainly, that when one became a Christian he or she ceased to be a man or a woman, a slave or a free man, a Jew or a Gentile. None of these, however, should cause separation, because all are of equal preciousness in Christ Jesus.

DIFFERING ROLES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Although the church is to hold unswervingly to the view that women and men are equally valuable in the eyes of God, it must also reflect the New Testament teaching that men and women are to fill different roles in the church.

For instance, in the Lord's plan for church government each congregation is to be led by elders and deacons (Philippians 1:1). In listing the qualifications for elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and for deacons (1 Timothy 3:12) being the "*husband of one wife*" is mentioned. This obviously excludes women from these roles; only men are to be elders and deacons.

Although women can teach privately, as we learned from the example of Priscilla, women are forbidden to teach men publicly (1 Timothy 2:12). The common practice today of women being accepted as preachers is not a practice approved in the New Testament and should not be practiced in the church (1 Corinthians 14: 34).

The great emphasis today on the rights of women should not cause Christians to question the Lord's forbidding women to assume certain roles in the church. Even if no reasons for this action were given we should accept by faith what God has revealed. Some reasons, however,

were given. Consider the following:

- 1.** Woman's role in the church reflects the original act of creation in which man was first created (1 Timothy 2:13).
- 2.** Woman's role in the church reflects that it was the woman who was first deceived by Satan and fell into sin (1 Timothy 2:13).
- 3.** Woman's role in the church is closely connected to her unique role in the home. Woman alone can give birth to children (1 Timothy 2:15). The man must care for and provide for his wife and love her as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25). The woman's willing submission to her husband is most likely to call forth the best of his care (Ephesians 5:22,33). In order for there to be the greatest amount of happiness in the home, God has established different roles for men and women in the home. This difference is likewise to be reflected in the church.

In summary, we have found:

- (1)** The church should teach what the Bible states about the role of women, regardless of what others are teaching and practicing.
- (2)** Christ accepted women as his followers on the same basis as men, although he appointed no women apostles.
- (3)** Women were among the earliest members of the church and an important part of its life. They were outstanding in their abilities to extend hospitality, to help provide for the needy and to express serving love which is to characterize the church as the family of God.
- (4)** In God's sight men and women are to accept each other as being of equal value because God respects both equally.
- (5)** God has ordained there are certain roles in the church which a woman cannot fill, and has given reasons why he made this distinction.

The church must uphold what God has set forth in this and all other matters.