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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 66

*Ministry Work Group Statement concerning the ministry of
women in the Church today*

This document represents work in progress. We offer it to you for comment and criticism. The matters are sensitive and require continued reflection and discussion. The authors are convinced that 1 Timothy 2:11-15 is still relevant to the Church today. Although it places restrictions on the public ministry that women can have, it is intended, like any other word from God, to bless us. We must continue to reflect on its application to us. At the same time, we acknowledge that other New Testament passages need to be taken into account, to give a complete picture of what is appropriate and helpful for our churches and glorifying to God.

We agree that all Scripture is God-breathed, internally consistent, and authoritative in doctrine and practice for the Church today. A range of biblical texts must be interpreted and synthesised when considering appropriate roles for men and women in contemporary public ministry.

New Testament teaching on this subject is authoritative for our situation today, despite the fact that it comes to us from a very different historical and cultural context. A proper application of the relevant texts will be based on an understanding of the *theological and relational issues* that they raise. We contend that, where some passages put restrictions on the type of Church ministry exercised by women, this is in order to maintain a pattern of relationship between men and women that reflects God's purposes of unity in diversity in Genesis 1-2. Man and woman are created to be 'the image of God' (Gen. 1:26-7), and yet the woman is created after the man, to be 'a helper suitable for him' (Gen. 2:18 NIV). In Christ, men and women are heirs together of 'the gracious gift of life' (1 Pet. 3:7). Nevertheless, 'the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour' (Eph. 5:23). These important perspectives need to be maintained and expressed together, in the Christian family and in the Church. Various passages about the public ministry of women need to be read in the light of this teaching, as the following propositions and supportive argument suggest.

We agree that some biblical passages encourage men and women to teach, exhort and admonish one another, without making any gender distinction (e.g. Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:14; Heb. 5:12; cf. Acts 18:26, for a husband and wife team working together to teach and correct a significant leader of the early Church).

The New Testament envisages a word ministry that is open to all believers, which recognises *the complementarity of men and women in God's created order and in his plan of salvation*. However, such ministry is not to be expressed in a way that disregards the restrictions placed on the public ministry of women in other passages. One part of Scripture cannot legitimately be used to override another. For example, the ministry of teaching and mutual exhortation/admonition that can take place in small groups or at a personal level ought to be conducted in a way that encourages husbands to nourish and care for their wives spiritually and for wives to express the subjection to their husbands that is appropriate in the Lord (cf. Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18-19). A woman leading a mixed or male home group on her own cannot model the pattern of relationship and leadership outlined by the apostle.

3. We agree that Scripture specifically encourages women to teach children (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15) and to teach other women (Titus 2:3,4).

Disregarding the positive message of these passages means devaluing those for whom these ministries should be exercised. Women ought to be encouraged and trained for the special ministry they can have to children or to other women. For this to happen more effectively, congregations need to promote and actively support women seeking 'full time ministry' positions in parish teams. At the same time, we must avoid gender stereotyping and realise that children need to be taught by gifted male teachers as well and that women in congregations cannot simply be ministered to by other women. Men similarly need to benefit from the spiritual insights and experience of women for a truly biblical complementarity to be enjoyed.

4. We agree that Scripture allows women to pray and prophesy in church (1 Cor. 11:2-16), though the apostle encourages women to do so in a way that acknowledges the 'headship' of the man. In our situation this not only allows women to lead in prayer in a mixed gathering but also to have a formal liturgical role.

Some have disputed whether 1 Cor. 11:2-16 applies to a congregational situation. However, the next section (11:17-34) is clearly related to the gathering of the whole church and the coupling of prayer with prophecy in 11:4-5 suggests a public rather than a private situation. Paul begins a new section of the letter in 11:2, which continues to 14:40 and focuses on congregational ministry. The nature of prophecy in 1 Corinthians is considered under (5) below. Although we may differ about whether prophecy in any form continues in the Church today, there can be no doubt that the important public ministry of public prayer is to be shared by women. Some would argue that the apostle is simply concerned with wives acknowledging the headship of their husbands in 1 Cor. 11:2-16; 14:33b-36; 1 Tim. 2:11-15. However, the argument in the first and last of these passages appears to be concerned with the role relationships of men and women more generally in congregational ministry.

Much debate has taken place about the issue of head covering (whether hair or veil) in this passage. While it is difficult to be certain about the practice condemned by the apostle, he clearly affirms that the oneness of man and woman in Christ (stressed in 11:11-12) does not obliterate the distinctions given in creation (11:7-10). Women who prayed or prophesied in public were to do so in a way that acknowledged that 'the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God' (v. 2 NIV). Head covering in first-century Corinth was a cultural expression of a woman's distinct role (vv. 13-15). We are not bound by the cultural patterns and expectations of the first century AD. But Paul's theological agenda remains to challenge us about the way men and women can best honour God in ministry together in any age and situation. The apostle is not simply being restrictive in this passage. He maintains the right of women who acknowledge the distinctive roles and responsibilities given to men and women in Scripture to pray or prophesy in church meetings.

5. We agree that the apostle's expectation that women would prophesy in church (1 Cor. 11:5) allows for women to preach occasionally or at least to give informal words of encouragement or challenge to the Church, but acknowledge that this conclusion arises from a particular view of prophecy.

There was a distinctive prophetic role given to the apostles and other key figures in the New Testament, which ceased with their passing (cf. Eph. 3:5-6; 4:11-13; 1 Cor. 14:37-40). There was also a more general manifestation of 'prophetism' in the early Church, in fulfilment of Joel 2:28-9 (cf. Acts 2:14-21), which has not ceased. The gift of the Holy Spirit enables men and women to share their God-given insights into Scripture and the gospel and to apply these insights to the local situation. It is interesting to note that Puritan writers envisaged an ongoing prophetic ministry of this sort in the churches of their day. Not all sermons in today's church are 'teaching' as the New Testament would understand it (e.g. 1 Tim. 4:1-11; 6:1-5), but are words of encouragement, exhortation or admonition.

The congregational prophecy mentioned in 1 Corinthians was divinely directed but not inspired or authoritative like the teaching of Paul (1 Cor. 14:29-40). Prophecy is a mode of communication that is distinguished from teaching in the New Testament. Paul did not expect that all would be prophets (1 Cor. 12:29) but urged the Corinthians to strive for, and exercise, this gift (14:1-5). He envisaged that the Church would be built up, encouraged and consoled by prophecy (14:3), and that 'all may learn' (14:31). He also implies that when there was prophecy of this nature in a congregation, unbelievers who were present might hear the gospel and be converted (14:23-25). Such a reference suggests

that prophecy was an outworking of gospel truths in the lives of the gathered congregation. It is highly significant that women were engaged in this public ministry, even though in that cultural context they were prevented from evaluating prophecy or asking questions (see below on 1 Cor. 14:34-36).

Those who disagree with this application of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 believe that prophecy was an exception to the rule of 1 Tim. 2:11-12 because it was *a form of divine revelation that directly expressed the authority of God*. Many would also argue that such prophetic revelation ceased after the apostolic era with the formation of the New Testament Canon.

6. We agree that the command for women to be silent in the churches (1 Cor. 14:34-36) is not a total prohibition on women speaking in any mixed Christian gathering. There are nevertheless various views on the restrictions that may follow for women in our churches today.

The prohibition against women speaking in the churches in 1 Cor. 14:34 should be understood in the immediate context. Either it restricts them from engaging in the weighing of prophecy (14:29), or forbids them asking questions which could more properly be put to their husbands at home (14:35). Whatever the precise nature of the activity, it was regarded by the apostle as a denial of biblical teaching. When he says 'it is shameful for a woman to speak in church', he has in mind behaviour which is inconsistent with the subordinate or submissive role required of them in 'the law' (14:34). The reference is apparently to the creation narratives in Genesis, on which the apostle more obviously bases his argument in 1 Cor. 11:2-16. So Paul is concerned about behaviour in church that challenges or undermines appropriate relationships between husbands and wives in the Lord. The positive implication is that husbands ought to be caring for their wives spiritually at home.

7. We agree on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, that women should not be admitted to an office that involves the regular teaching or leadership of a congregation.

Although some have disputed whether this prohibition applies to a congregational situation, the preceding context speaks about men praying in public and women dressing in a way that is appropriate to a church meeting (2:8-10). The notion of women learning in silence begins and ends the sequence in 2:11-12. While it could be argued that men also should learn 'with full submission', the context attributes to men the role of teaching in church and women the role of learning in silence. Some have argued that there was a particular reason for this in the Ephesian situation, but there is no concrete evidence for this. Rather, Paul goes on to back up his prohibition (I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man) with theological arguments about the priority of the man in God's creation plan, based on Genesis 2 ('For Adam was formed first and then Eve'), and about the woman's initiative in the fall of Genesis 3 ('and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor'). A further argument about being saved 'through childbearing', which is distinctly the role of a woman in the created order, completes the paragraph (2:15).

Debate continues about the precise meaning and significance of 2:14-15. But whatever we conclude about the details, it is clear that there are profound theological reasons behind the prohibition of 2:11-12. Paul is not simply using Old Testament texts and perspectives in an *ad hominem* way. Neither is he simply giving instruction for a particular church in the first century AD. The next chapter goes on to declare that Paul's instructions in this letter are designed to show 'how one ought to behave in the household of God' (3:15). Prior to this, he has outlined the requirements for 'overseers' in the church, focussing on spiritual maturity, aptness to teach, and the ability of a man to 'manage his own household well' (3:1-7). There is a link between family leadership and a godly pattern of leadership by males in the Christian congregation. And 'the household of God' is a term that clearly applies beyond the confines of the Ephesian church.

Congregational life should therefore reflect and support the pattern of family life outlined in the New Testament. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 implies that women who teach in the congregation in a way that exercise authority over men, challenge the pattern of relationships required by God in Christian marriage. This is not to deny complementarity but to express the teaching found elsewhere about the husband being the 'head' of the wife. Whether women are married or not, their exercise of this authoritative teaching role cuts across the model of congregational leadership that the apostle goes on to outline in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Perceptions of authority as well as the actual exercise of authority become important here.

8. We agree that women should exercise ministries that are full-time, paid, authenticated and recognised, but we differ about the extent to which they should speak or minister publicly in church. We want to encourage women to train for the sort of ministry that Scripture allows, and to challenge churches to employ them in imaginative ways.

Women ought to be trained and licensed as accredited lay workers in our parishes. But employment opportunities

need to be opened up by churches wishing to pursue this option before dioceses are willing to support candidates for training. We regret that there is still confusion over diaconal roles in the Church of England. Women can and should still be ordained as permanent deacons, but parishes need to offer such posts to women if dioceses are to train and license them. Some would argue that it is possible for a woman to be ordained elder/priest and function as part of a team ministry or in a chaplaincy situation, where they are not regularly teaching in way that exercises authority over men. This option needs to be more widely considered. In parochial situations, the incumbent has ultimate responsibility for what is taught, and should exercise leadership over the church through teaching, pastoral oversight and discipline. For this reason, and because of the teaching of 1 Tim. 2:11-15, we contend that it is inappropriate for a woman to be a congregational leader in a solo capacity or head of a team ministry.

In the ten years since women were first ordained as priests in the Church of England, the debate has moved on to the issue of women and the episcopate. We believe that the biblical principles relevant to that earlier debate need to be restated and applied to discussions about women as bishops. According to the ASB Ordinal, the bishop is to be a chief pastor, who 'shares with his fellow bishops a special responsibility to maintain and further the unity of the Church, to uphold its discipline, and to guard its faith'. It is the duty of the bishop 'to watch over and pray for all those committed to his charge, and to teach and govern them after the example of the Apostles, speaking in the name of God and interpreting the gospel of Christ'. For the same scriptural reasons outlined above, if episcopacy is the exercise of authority through teaching and discipline, it is not a defensible form of ministry for women. The issue is not simply that of oversight in the diocese but of modelling biblical patterns of relationship and responsibility.

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