

# What Does the Bible Teach About the Roles of Women in the Church?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

## Introduction:

West Islip Church of Christ in New York, meeting since 1963, has retained some practices such as a weekly observance of the Lord's Supper and immersion for baptism. On their website, you will find the following statement: "We praise God joyfully and reflectively in worship services designed to let everyone participate—men and women, young and old. (For more information on women and men sharing equally in the church's work, worship, and leadership, click here.)" Upon doing so, you will read the following: "West Islip Church of Christ is led by a group of gifted shepherds known collectively as the Council. The Council is currently composed of nine individuals: Don Bayer, Sue Bayer, David Fritz, Methel Gale, Hubert Gibbons, Julie Madsen, Barbara O'Connor, Donna White, and John White. Our ministers, Katie Hays and Lance Pape, serve under the guidance of the Council."

They have the mission statement: "We are on a journey..." Isaac Errett said the same thing to Daniel Sommer in 1874 when the Christian Churches departed the faith. West Islip is keeping the same two tenets of faith that Errett kept, and is imitating all of the errors adopted by the Christian Churches over 100 years ago.

This church is a part of a group of churches which promote "gender justice" within the progressive churches of Christ movement. Lance Pape, one of the ministers for the West Islip Church of Christ manages a website dedicated to the promoting of gender justice in the churches of Christ. The website is called Gal328.org. According to the website, this is the definition of gender justice:

"In general, gender justice means recognizing that men and women are created by God, redeemed by Christ, and gifted by the Spirit truly without distinction or partiality. In Christian community, gender justice means encouraging both men and women to exercise their Spirit-given gifts in the church's work, worship, and leadership, and celebrating the truth that the Spirit grants such gifts without respect to gender. Concretely, gender justice in the Church of Christ includes opening traditionally masculine leadership roles and activities (deacon, elder, minister, worship leader, preacher, teacher, etc.) to women, and encouraging men to discover and cultivate their gifts for activities traditionally performed by women." ([www.gal328.org](http://www.gal328.org))

Other professed churches of Christ have committed themselves to this error. All are very large, urban churches, but as the city churches go, so will the suburban and rural churches follow eventually. This movement began nearly 30 years ago. It is firmly embedded and growing:

- Bering Drive Church of Christ (Houston, TX)
- Bowie Church of Christ (Bowie, MD)
- Brookline Church of Christ (Boston, MA)
- Cahaba Valley Church, An Ecumenical Church of Christ (Birmingham, AL)
- Culver Palms Church of Christ (Los Angeles, CA)
- Malibu Church of Christ (Malibu, CA)
- Manhattan Church of Christ (New York, NY)
- Stamford Church of Christ (Stamford, CT)
- Stoney Creek Church of Christ (Stoney Creek, Ontario)
- West Islip Church of Christ (Long Island, NY)

It often begins with incremental changes: waiting on the Lord's Table, scripture reading, team teaching in Bible classes, praise teams in singing; then, it progresses to deaconesses, public teaching and preaching, and the eldership.

## **I. WHAT DO THE SCRIPTURES TEACH IN THIS MATTER? ORDERLINESS**

- A. I believe that all men and women are equal in the sight of God.
  - 1. Gal. 3:28; 1Cor. 11:11-12
- B. However, the roles of men and women differ in families and local churches.
- C. God's order of authority
  - 1. God is over all - 1Cor. 15:27-28
  - 2. Christ is subject to God - 1Cor. 11:3
  - 3. Elders are subject to Christ - 1Peter 5:2-4
  - 4. Christians, men and women, are subject to elders - Heb. 13:7, 17
  - 5. Wives are subject to husbands - Eph. 5:23
  - 6. Children are subject to parents - Eph. 6:1; 1Tim. 5:14
  - 7. These are relationships in the church and in the home.
- D. Value and function defined in scripture
  - 1. God and Christ are equal in value as Deity - Phil. 2:6
    - a. Christ is subordinate in function for the purpose and plan for redeeming us from sin.
  - 2. Men and woman - Are equal in value as human beings before God - Gal. 3:28
    - a. Women are subordinate in function for family and worship purposes.
    - b. Not a matter of value or inferiority, but of function and role.

## **II. WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE WORK OF THE LOCAL CHURCH**

- A. The God ordained difference in functional role is manifested by silence
  - 1. 1Cor. 14:34-35 - Context refers to a called worship service, not an informal Bible study - 1Tim. 2:11-12
  - 2. "Well, what does silence mean?" - 1Cor. 14:28, 34
  - 3. What is meant by one is meant by the other.
- B. Does not void other direct commands for Christian women. Permits:
  - 1. Singing - Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19
  - 2. Bible study - Acts 18:24-26
  - 3. Confession - Rom. 10:10
  - 4. Commanded activities in which subjection is actual and visible.
- C. Prohibits:
  - 1. Taking authority, exercising domination or being disorderly and disruptive in any aspect of the work of the church.
  - 2. Preaching or teaching over a man - 1Tim. 2:11-14
  - 3. Paul is not forbidding the women from all forms of teaching
    - a. Titus 2:3-5; Acts 18:26
  - 4. Paul is teaching the women that they are not to teach or to exercise authority over the man. This is to be understood in the context of worship and leadership in the church in harmony with his instructions to the Corinthians, no more and no less.

5. What does this forbid? Leadership roles in the work, worship, and organization of the local church
  6. What does this permit? Everything else authorized for Christians in the work of teaching the lost, edifying one another, and attending to the needs of the less fortunate
- D. To avoid developing the kind of environment that facilitates these changes, consider the factors that lead up to it.
1. Cultural changes... everyone blames this; it is not relevant if disciples are determined to remain steadfast.
  2. Men who are spiritual bullies. Domineering attitudes generate rebellion, in the church, in government, and in the home. I am not impressed by a man who can push his wife or other women around, and I certain that God is even less impressed.
  3. Men who are spiritual wimps. Absence of leadership creates a void that wants to be filled. Starts with "My wife told me..." Is it your conviction or not; if she convinced you, well and good, be a man and claim it. Don't shift the responsibility, even verbally, to your wife.
  4. Men who will not listen - 2Tim. 2:24-25. Any man who thinks he will not profit from listening to a woman must think himself better and smarter than the eloquent Apollos, evangelist and fellow worker with the apostle Paul. Incidentally, half of the people Paul greeted and praised in his epistles were women. Reckon he listened to them when they talked?
  5. Women who want to be men. More rare than one might think; generally speaking, men tend to think, speak, and act independently; women tend to think, speak, and act communally in accord with others in her family or group. The few exceptions to this can create strife.
- E. When Christians, men and women alike, treat one another with respect and affection both will be content with and eager to fulfill their God designed roles in the home and in the church.
1. When Christian men become domineering or passive or indifferent, they create a fertile soil for the seeds of digression.
  2. Sisters, do not be uncomfortable, but rather glorify the role God designed for you in this world; brethren, be men like Christ and you will never give your sisters in Christ cause to be uncomfortable with your role in this world

### **III. THE WORK OF GODLY WOMEN ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE**

- A. "As the law also says" - 1Cor. 14:34
1. What does the law say? - Numbers 30
  2. Was there a role for women under the law?
    - a. Ex. 15:20-21 - Miriam and women singing
    - b. 1Chron. 25:5-6 - Daughters of Heman played instruments for the temple.
    - c. Ezra 2:65; Neh. 7:67 - Women singers assigned to Temple worship
    - d. Ex. 38:8; 1Sam. 2:22 - Serving women assisted in preparations for temple worship

- e. Ex. 35:22 - Women made freewill offerings to construct the tabernacle
- f. Joshua 8:35; Deut. 31:12 - Women were instructed to attend the reading of the Law
- g. Deut. 27; Neh. 8 - Women were instructed to agree with the reading of the law
- B. "In the beginning" - 1Tim. 2:13; Gen. 3:16; 1Peter 3:4-6
- C. "As in all of the churches" - 1Cor. 15:33
  - 1. Answers the argument that the command was only for Corinth
    - a. Acts 12:12-15, 1:14
    - 2. 1Cor. 11:3, 14:40 - Is this true in all churches?
- D. "Because" (why?)
  - 1. Consistency - 1Cor. 14:33 - "As in all the churches."
  - 2. Submission - 1Cor. 11:3, 14:34; Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22-24
  - 3. To prevent shame - 1Cor. 14:35
  - 4. Commanded - 1Cor. 14:36-37
  - 5. Orderliness - 1Cor. 14:40

#### **IV. THERE IS MUCH WORK FOR GODLY WOMEN**

- A. Attention is frequently given to the limitations placed on women in the assemblies of the church.
  - 1. 1Cor. 14:34-37; 1Tim. 2:11-12
  - 2. However, the early church benefited greatly by the contributions of many women.
- B. The church at Rome:
  - 1. Phoebe, a helper of Paul and many others - Rom. 16:1-2
  - 2. Priscilla, risking her life for Paul - Rom. 16:3-4
  - 3. One named Mary, who bestowed "much labor" - Rom. 16:6
  - 4. Twin sisters, Tryphena and Tryphosa - Rom. 16:12
  - 5. The beloved Persis - Rom. 16:12
  - 6. The growth of many churches is the result of labor by women.
  - 7. Lydia at Philippi who opened her home for Paul and his preaching companions - Acts 16:15
  - 8. Mary, Joanna, and Susanna who financially helped to support Jesus preaching ministry - Luke 8:1-3
- C. How can that be, if women are limited in what they can do in public worship?
  - 1. Public assemblies are a small part of the overall work of a congregation.
  - 2. Most of work that makes a church grow is done outside of assemblies.
  - 3. Women are often in a position to provide much of this needed work.
- D. Benevolence is an important work primarily performed by individuals.
  - 1. It is a mark of pure and undefiled religion - James 1:27
  - 2. Women are well-suited for the work of benevolence.
  - 3. They bring pleasant graciousness, tender kindness, and gentle courtesy of which most men are normally not capable.
    - a. The unique attributes of femininity facilitate this work.
    - b. Mercy and compassion are almost second-nature to women, inherent in their design by God for motherhood.

- c. And mercy is one of the gifts the Lord has given to His church -
        - 1) Rom. 12:6-8
    - 4. They possess skills through which benevolence can be performed.
      - a. Understanding clothing, as Dorcas made garments for needy widows - Acts 9:36-39.
      - b. Cooking, baby-sitting, ministering to the sick, extending hospitality, etc.
      - c. Women who were “taken into the number” had to be known for the good works they had done in benevolence
        - 1) 1Tim. 5:9-10.
      - d. Have you noticed that these things are what Paul said were those things that make one content in life? - 1Tim. 6:8
- E. Edification is an essential work involving building up the body of Christ, through the work of every member - Eph. 4:15-16.
- 1. Women can also do much to edify the church.
  - 2. Through formal teaching of others:
    - a. Grandmothers and mothers can teach children, as Lois and Eunice did Timothy - 2Tim. 1:5, 3:14-15
    - b. Older women can and should teach younger women
      - 1) Titus 2:3-5
    - c. For people who come into the church without the benefit of godly mothers and grandmothers, Christian women can step up and fill the role of being an edifying influence.
  - 3. Through informal words of encouragement:
    - a. It has been said that though men are natural producers, women are natural nurturers.
    - b. With so many dysfunctional families, mental illness, and emotional disorders today, the gift of encouragement and nurturing of women is essential
    - c. Many teachers and preachers have been helped by godly women encouraging them in their work, especially me.
  - 4. There is a special need for women to see themselves as teachers of young people and other women, and as encouragers of men in their work of preaching the gospel.
- F. Evangelism is a crucial work.
- 1. This work can and must be done by everyone - Acts 8:1, 4.
  - 2. Women can do much in the area of evangelism.
  - 3. They can help support those who preach the gospel.
    - a. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna - Luke 8:1-3
    - b. Hospitality of Lydia - Acts 16:15
  - 4. They can tell others about Christ
    - a. The example of the Samaritan woman instrumental in converting many people to Christ - John 4:28-30, 39-42
    - b. Convert the lost and erring as Priscilla did with Aquila.
      - 1) Provided a place for Paul to stay during his ministry at Corinth - Acts 18:1-3
      - 2) Converted Apollos at Ephesus - Acts 18:24-26

- 3) Hosted a church at Ephesus in their own home -  
1Cor. 16:19
- 4) Hosted a church at Rome in their own home -  
Rom. 16:3-5
- c. Even by example, godly women can lead others to Christ,  
including unbelieving husbands - 1Peter 3:1-2.
- d. Many souls have been saved and churches started through the  
evangelistic efforts of godly women.

Conclusion:

- A. There is much that women can contribute to the work of a local church.
  - 1. Praying, encouraging, singing, teaching children's classes, teaching family, friends and neighbors, giving of her means, communing at the Lord's table, visiting the sick, ministering to the sick, sorrowful, and suffering, sending cards, making calls, writing Bible study materials, arranging Bible studies, seeking prospects, preparing communion, helping with gospel meeting preparations, inviting others, raising elders, deacons, preachers and teachers, supporting them.
  - 2. There is a wide range of activities women can engage in without going beyond the limitations placed on them in public assemblies
  - 3. The true measure of a local church is not defined only by what occurs in the assembly.
    - a. It includes what the members do daily in the home, at work, in the world.
    - b. It involves benevolence, edification, and evangelism that take place on a daily, personal basis.
- B. When godly women are active in the service of the Lord, using the unique talents and opportunities given to them:
  - 1. Souls are saved; they are strengthened in the Lord, and cared for in times of need.
  - 2. The Lord's church is made stronger, and the kingdom of God is expanded in the world.
  - 3. May there always be an abundance of women in the Lord's church like Mary Magdalene, Dorcas, Lydia, Priscilla, Lois, Eunice, and Phoebe, women who did far more than teach children's Bible classes and bake communion bread!
  - 4. May we never take for granted the valuable services rendered by our sisters in Christ; rather may we receive and encourage them in a way worthy of the saints.
- C. "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also" (Rom. 16:1-2).