

Women in the Church – a Biblical Study

Our salvation does not depend on our view on "women in office." And it is certainly not the only issue facing the church. So why all the fuss? Why polarization in churches which have adopted the policy of ordaining women? Are "conservatives" not making a mountain out of a molehill?

Rev. James Brice Clark of the Episcopal church acknowledges that women's ordination "has hurt the Episcopal Church. We have gained no new converts because of it. We have lost conservative members. We have suffered schisms, with at least six new dissident Episcopal churches being formed." So-called "progressives" say that time marches on. The church is not a museum, but a living body adjusting to the rapidly changing social mores of the 20th century. And why shouldn't women function as elders or pastors if more and more women are now working alongside men as company executives, directors, lawyers, judges, and even professors of theology? And are women not as capable as men of leading the church, in learning, teaching, counselling, or preaching? Why keep gifted women out of office?

Evangelical feminists Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty ask: "Ordination is relevant to women who feel called to the official ministry, and many women in all branches of the church do feel this call of God upon their lives. Can the Church continue to deny them the opportunity to respond to this call?" But the issue goes much deeper than the "rights for women," or being progressive, keeping up with the trend, making the Gospel relevant.

The issue of women in office is not minor. So much is involved. The discussion focuses not just on women in headship positions in the church, it also involves our view of Scripture, the family, and even God. In his new book, *Women in the Church*, Samuele Bacchiocchi says that if we erase the role that men and women are called to fulfill in the home and in the church, as many feminist theologians are seeking to do, then there is no longer any reason for maintaining the Fatherhood of God. I believe that he is right on. Just read the current literature on the doctrine of God. Bacchiocchi says that a revision of the language for God is a most dangerous trend, and, if allowed to prevail, will result in a new religion widely at variance with the Christian faith.

Through What Glasses?

How should we look at the issue? Historically the Christian church has taken the position that the Bible is the revelation from God and the sole rule for faith and practice. Human culture changes. Times do change. And each generation of Christians must re-apply the basic teaching of Scripture. That is why the first and foremost reason for restricting the role of the elder/pastor is theological and not biological or cultural.

Bacchiocchi's purpose for writing his book is the making of a positive statement of what he perceives to be a vital biblical principle:

Men and women are equal before God by virtue of creation and redemption. Yet God assigned distinctive and complementary roles for men and women to fill in their relation to each other. These roles are not nullified but clarified by Christ's redemption and should be reflected in the church.

In brief, he develops his argument as follows:

1. The Order of Creation

A first and fundamental reason for viewing the ordination of women as unbiblical is suggested by the order of creation. Adam and Eve are seen as typifying the distinctive but complementary roles assigned to men and women. The apostle Paul, who has written so much on the role of women in the church, bases his teaching not on the consequences of the Fall as described in Genesis 3, but on the pre-fall order of creation as asserted in Genesis 1 and 2. The foundation of man's headship role is not found in the "curse" of the Fall; it is the original purpose of God in creation. Bacchiocchi is in full agreement, therefore, with the CRC synod of 1984 which declared: "The headship principle, " which means that the man should exercise primary leadership and direction setting in the home, in the church, and in society in general, is a creational norm recognized in both the Old and New Testament.

2. The Order of Redemption

A careful study of Galatians 3:28, so often referred to by proponents of women's ordination, shows that the message of this text has significant social implications. Christ's coming was greatly affected the social relationships of men and women, but has not changed or eliminated the role differences between them. Being one in Christ does not change a Jew into a Gentile, or a man into a woman, rather it changes the way each one of them relates to the other.

3. Headship and Subordination

In his discussion of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36, Bacchiocchi says that Paul does not exclude women from active participation in the church. However, women ministered in the church not as appointed leaders, but in supportive roles. The creational pattern of male headship and female subordination in the home and in the church, requires that women should not exercise spiritual oversight of the flock.

4. The Symbolic Role of the Pastor

The symbolic role of the pastor has often been overlooked. The New Testament envisions the church, says Bacchiocchi, as an extended family of believers in which the

elder/pastor rules on the one hand as representative of the church members to God and on the other hand as God's representative to the church members. Says Bacchiocchi:

The pastor fulfills a unique symbolic role in the church as representative of the Heavenly Father, Shepherd, High Priest, and Head of the church. A woman pastor cannot appropriately fulfill such a symbolic role because her scriptural role is not that of a father, shepherd, priest or head of the church. Thus, to ordain women to serve as pastors/elders means not only to violate divine design, but also to adulterate the pastor's symbolic representation of God.

5. Male Imagery of God

Another reason for viewing ordination of women as unwarranted is the predominant male imagery used in Scripture to reveal God. Bacchiocchi says that the purpose of God revealing Himself, especially and consistently through Jesus Christ, as our Father and not as our mother is primarily because Fatherhood preserves the biblical principle of headship and subordination and thus best represents the role that God Himself sustains toward us His children, namely, the role of an almighty, just and caring Father. And he maintains that this role functions as the foundational model for all forms of human fatherhood (Ephesians 3:14-15), whether it be that of the husband in the home or of the pastor in the church.

6. The Role of Women in the Church

Which role should women have in the church? Scripture's answer is: women should be appointed to any and all ministries which do not violate the creational role distinctions of men and women. And Bacchiocchi outlines many tasks that can be done by women. For example:

While Scripture excludes women from the office of elder/pastor which entails the responsibility for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of church ordinances, it does not exclude them from praying, reading or singing in public worship.

Bacchiocchi, though a Seventh-Day Adventist theologian, quotes from many theologians and authors of other denominations, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. The book has two forewords written by scholars, who made the greatest contributions towards the development of his thoughts. Both of them are outstanding New Testament scholars, namely, Prof. Wayne Grudem of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Prof. James B. Hurley of the Reformed Theological Seminary. As the CRC Synod of 1990 will have to address the report on headship, synodical delegates as well as the people-in-the pew should take time to read Bacchiocchi's excellent study. It clarifies many questions. Readers without theological training as well as the "professionally" trained will benefit from it. It is without technical jargon. Each argument is carefully summarized. It takes the reader to the actual Bible text so that the argument can be judged on the basis of Scripture. This fine and extremely valuable study would have been greatly enhanced by subject and Scripture indexes.

Women in the Church. A Biblical Study on the Role of Women in the Church
by Samuele Bacchiocchi; Biblical Perspective,
4569 Lisa Lane, Berrien Springs, MI 49103, USA; softcover, 295 pages

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February, 1990