

# The Christian Woman In the Church

The Christian woman may think of herself as a second-class citizen in the church sometimes. It may seem that in every other sphere of life she has all the privileges of a man, but in the church alone she is denied the prerogative of leadership. She can be elected to political office, teach in a university, participate in sports, serve on the police force, or die for her country as a soldier . . . but in the Lord's church, she is not to serve as a preacher or an elder.

This may seem so backward, so out of date, that she is turned off by such a strange, misogynist (woman-hating) restriction. As a result, she may either reject the church or turn to a denomination that does not penalize her for being female. At least, the biblical guidelines may make her wonder, "Why? Does God hate women? If not, why did He place the woman in an inferior position? Could we have misinterpreted the Scriptures? Could the restrictions the New Testament places on women in the church no longer apply?"

The answers to these questions are important to the Christian woman and to the church. We want to examine them as we discuss what the Christian woman is and is not to do in the church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>To study more on this subject, see "The Relationship of Men and Women in the Church" in the "Christian Man" issue of *Truth for Today* (November 1997). Also see "Female Servants of the Church," "Are Women Permitted To Speak in the Assembly?" and "The Woman's Role in the Church" in the "Christian Woman, 1" issue (December 1997).

## WHAT THE CHRISTIAN WOMAN IS NOT TO DO

Four passages restrict the Christian woman in the church: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16; 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35; 1 Timothy 2:11–15; and 1 Timothy 3:1–13. What do they teach?

1. She is restricted from exercising leadership in the assembly of the church. First Corinthians 14:34, 35, in particular, is talking about the "assembly" of the church—when the congregation has assembled, or come together (see 14:19, 23, 26, 28, 34, 35). In that situation, women are to "keep silent"; they are not to speak publicly. Since preachers do speak in the assembly, Christian women are not to serve as preachers.

2. She is restricted from having authority over men. According to 1 Timothy 2:12, a woman is not to "exercise authority over a man" in a church setting. ("Usurp authority over the man" [KJV] is not a good translation.)

3. She is restricted from serving as an elder or a deacon. According to 1 Timothy 3:2, the elder is to be the "husband of one wife." The deacon is likewise to be the "husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 2:12). Thus women are not to be selected as elders or deacons.

4. She is restricted from appearing to reject the authority of her husband. This seems to be the significance of 1 Corinthians 11, which required women to wear something on their heads when they were praying or prophesying. The head covering was a symbol of the fact that they were in subjection to their husbands. We

must apply the principle of this requirement today: The wife should avoid doing anything that suggests that she is not submissive to her husband.

Why has God placed such restrictions on the Christian woman? These guidelines were not given because God hates women or considers them to be inferior. God loves all and sees all as equally valuable. According to Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul was not denying the existence of different races, ethnic or societal groups, or sexes. Rather, he was saying that these differences are relatively unimportant: All human beings are lost in the same way; all are invited to be saved in the same way; and all are valued and loved by God in the same way!

Further, God has not placed restrictions on women in the church because women are incapable of preaching or leading. We have all heard women who were excellent speakers and known of women who were great leaders. The Bible does not teach that God has denied women leadership roles in the church because they are incapable of fulfilling them.

Why, then, did He impose these restrictions? The passages that place restrictions on women give several reasons: (1) The order of creation. Man was created first, then woman; thus women are to be submissive (1 Timothy 2:11–13; 1 Corinthians 11:8, 9). (2) The order of the fall into sin. The woman sinned first; therefore, the woman is to be submissive (1 Timothy 2:14). (3) What the law teaches (which may refer to the penalty placed on Eve after the sin in the Garden of Eden; 1 Corinthians 11:34). (4) The fact that in the home the woman is to submit to the man (1 Corinthians 11:3–5).

Beyond that, we cannot know the mind of God. We may simply say that God knows best—that He knows what men are able to do better and what women are able to do better. Perhaps He did not want women to spend their time doing tasks which men can do when women have more important roles to fulfill.

While the Bible limits the role of women, it also gives women the freedom to accomplish a wide variety of tasks in the church. If we focus only on what women are not permitted to do in

the church, we have missed much of what the Bible teaches. Let us consider the other side of the question.

## WHAT THE CHRISTIAN WOMAN IS TO DO

Before we think about what a Christian woman is to do, we must have a proper understanding of what the church is and what it does. Too frequently, we see the church as an institution that does nothing but worship publicly. If a woman believes that is all the church does, then she may get the idea "If I cannot lead in worship, I cannot do anything. I am worth nothing; I am nothing." This is, of course, a false idea of the church. Engaging in public worship is an important function of the church, but it is only the 10 percent of church activity best known to the public. Ninety percent of the activity occurs outside the assembly. Most of that work can be done by—and often is being done by—women.

What does God want women to do in the work of the church? We will answer that question from different perspectives.

### What the Scriptures Do Not Restrict

First, notice the ways that the Scriptures do *not* restrict the activities of the Christian woman.

The four passages just discussed do not apply to the Christian woman in business or politics; they relate only to the activities of the church.

Since they relate to a Christian woman's having authority over men, they do not apply even to the assembly of the church if no men are present.

A Christian woman is not restricted from serving in *any* leadership capacity. Women may lead in activities in which they will not have authority over men.

A Christian woman is not restricted from teaching. Women are required to teach other women. Women certainly can teach children and in some situations can teach, or help to teach, men (see Acts 18:24–28).

A Christian woman is not restricted from doing personal work, from leading individuals to Christ.

A Christian woman is not restricted from

being paid to do something that is scripturally right for her to do. Women serving as secretaries and as janitors for the church are often paid; we can also pay them for other work—teaching, counseling, or doing benevolent work.

A Christian woman is not restricted from working full time for the church in any capacity, as long as what she does is not forbidden by the Bible. Thus a local church may hire a female worker, especially to work with females in a variety of ways. A church may also send a Christian woman as a missionary to another land. Obviously, the biblical restrictions allow far more than they forbid.

### **The Woman's Importance as a Wife And a Mother**

Second, think about the importance of the Christian woman's role as a wife and a mother.

The Christian woman is not to be an elder, a deacon, or the preacher of a congregation; but each elder and each deacon will have a wife. Usually, the preacher will too. Without a helpful, supportive wife, how could the servant of the church do his job satisfactorily? Many men are now church leaders primarily because they had good wives who encouraged them to excel in the work of the church.

The Christian woman has a unique role in rearing her children in the Lord. No one can take her place: no nanny, no baby sitter, no day care center. Nothing else that she will ever do compares in importance to her role as a mother. Her influence on her children is immeasurable. When she works at being a good mother, she is doing church work! Church leaders should encourage her to concentrate on that work! To a large extent, the success of the Lord's church depends on the success of mothers!

### **New Testament "Role Models" For the Woman**

Third, look at some of the "role models" we find for Christian women in the New Testament.

Consider Dorcas, or Tabitha, a disciple who abounded in "deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did" (Acts 9:36). After her death, the widows wept and showed "the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them" (Acts 9:39). You may be a Dorcas, abounding in good works such as

making clothes for the needy.

Think of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who "was listening to the Lord's word, seated at His feet." Jesus said that she had "chosen the good part," which would "not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:39, 42). Before Jesus died, Mary anointed Him with costly perfume (John 12:1-8). Mary of Bethany had a talent for loving. You can be such a Mary, listening to and loving our Lord.

Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons (Luke 8:2), was the first person to whom Jesus appeared after the Resurrection (John 20:1-18). You can be a Mary Magdalene, a devoted follower of Jesus, eager to tell others about the risen Lord.

Priscilla was a faithful wife, a tentmaker, an apostle's fellow worker, a preacher's instructor, and a missionary. With her husband, she hosted the church in her own home. (See Romans 16:3-5; Acts 18:1-3; Acts 18:24-28.) You can be another Priscilla.

Remember the women who accompanied Jesus, who helped to support Him:

And many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him (Matthew 27:55).

And it came about soon afterwards, that He began going about from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God; and the twelve were with Him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means (Luke 8:1-3).

You can be like those women, following Jesus and supporting His cause with your money.

Phoebe was "a servant of the church," a "helper of many," and even a helper of Paul (Romans 16:1, 2). You can be a Phoebe, by serving the church and by helping others, including preachers and missionaries.

The Bible tells of other women who were valuable workers in the church: Euodia and Syntyche, who had shared Paul's "struggle in the cause of the gospel" (Philippians 4:2, 3); Mary, who worked hard for the Roman church (Romans 16:6). Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who were "workers in the Lord" (Romans 16:12). You

can be like one of these women by working with others to advance the cause of Christ.

### Practical Possibilities for the Woman

Fourth, consider from a practical standpoint some of the work a woman may do in the church. Setting aside for a moment the importance of a woman's role as a wife and a mother, here are twenty-five examples of what Christian women can do in and for the church:

1. Lead a pure and holy life.
2. Pray.
3. Read the Bible and become a knowledgeable student of the Word.
4. Give financially.
5. Faithfully attend the worship services.
6. Participate wholeheartedly in worship.
7. Encourage others.
8. Teach others, and try to lead them to Christ.
9. Engage in evangelistic work by going on short-term or long-term campaigns.
10. Help with mission work.
11. Visit others: absentees, the wayward, the sick, the shut-ins, the bereaved, and the downhearted.
12. Counsel others.
13. Help with benevolent work.
14. Lead in the women's program of the church, helping to plan activities which will give women an opportunity to be built up and provide them an opportunity to serve others.
15. Teach classes for women or children.
16. Assist in the educational program of the church in other ways—making visual aids, contacting absentees, etc.
17. Help with "secretarial work"—typing, filing, writing for the church bulletin, or taking care of the church's mail.
18. Serve as a librarian for the church library.
19. Clean the building.
20. Keep the grounds and exterior of the building looking nice.
21. Prepare the communion.
22. Take care of the baptismal garments.
23. Share the gospel by writing letters, articles, or tracts—and in other ways.
24. Write news articles about the church for the area newspaper, radio, or television station.
25. Write songs and choruses that will help children and others come to know God and His Word better.

You may be inclined to say, "I'm a woman, and I'm old [or disabled]; I can't do anything for the Lord." I am reminded of Manola, one of the members at a small congregation where I once preached. She had all sorts of ailments, including heart trouble, diabetes, crippling arthritis,

high blood pressure, and kidney problems. She was in constant pain. The time came when Manola could no longer attend church services; she was unable to leave her home, spending her days sitting in a comfortable chair. She still remained one of the hardest-working members of that congregation. She wrote dozens of letters each week on behalf of the church and made numerous phone calls to encourage the weak and the downhearted. She assured those who had been absent that they were missed, and she tried to interest others in coming to worship services or in studying the Bible. Manola's example teaches us that no one should say, "Since I am a woman [or old or disabled], I can do nothing for Christ."

### CONCLUSION

We should consider the woman's role from one more perspective. The tasks which we have listed involve roles of service, not prominence. We must realize that movements which seek "equal rights" and prominence for women do not have biblical priorities.

James and John sought prominent positions in the kingdom of God. The other apostles, when they heard about this, were angry at the sons of Zebedee. Why? Undoubtedly, they thought that they should have positions equal in importance to those of James and John. Jesus responded to their concern for power and prestige by saying,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:25b-28).

Jesus taught that the man who seeks greatness through occupying a more prominent position in the kingdom is wrong. Likewise, the woman who insists that she will not be satisfied until she holds as prominent a position as a man is wrong. Christianity is not about seeking position, prominence, or praise; it is about serving. The Christian life is not about becoming important or gaining recognition, but about becoming a servant.

A servant by definition is unequal. A Chris

tian woman who is a servant of the Lord expects to be unequal and does not care if she is; she only seeks to serve. She is not concerned about “equal rights”; as a servant, she knows that she has no rights!

### **CONCLUSION**

Let us all, women and men alike, renounce the pagan view that what matters most is being

prominent in the kingdom of God. Let us seek to be merely servants—servants of one another and servants of God. In so doing, we will find both the greatest fulfillment here and the ultimate reward hereafter, when we hear the Savior say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: . . .” (Matthew 25:21, 23; KJV). ◆

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