

Why I Believe Southern Baptist Churches Should Not Ordain Women

Dorothy Kelley Patterson

The focus upon ordination is a moot issue for profitable discussion. If the question as to whether or not a woman can hold an ecclesiastical office which is accompanied by ordination is decided in the negative, the matter of ordination is academic.

Historical Considerations

Having researched many published historical papers of male and female feminists, this writer is amazed at the lack of careful documentation concerning women throughout history who allegedly engaged successfully in teaching/ ruling positions in local churches. One wonders if some have employed jesuitical casuistry or historical hanky-panky in order to create a female Mt. Everest out of an anthill to prove a point.¹

Not only is documentation absent, but one also finds frequent editorializing and occasionally even the distortion of factual information in order to promote a certain view. Consider this report of the 1973 Southern Baptist Convention resolution "On the Place of Women in Christian Service."²

Two Convention actions since 1972 leave a mixed impression of the status of women in Southern Baptist churches. A resolution presented by Mrs. Richard Sappington of Texas and passed at the 1973 Convention attacked the women's liberation movement and reaffirmed Southern Baptists' view of the role of women in traditional, domestic terms. This resolution suggested that man is the head of woman and that "woman is the glory of man." This resolution could be interpreted to mean that Southern Baptists tend to see women as inferior to men and in a traditional role. This limited view of woman's role was countered by the action of the Convention in electing another female vice-president, Mrs. Carl E. Bates of North Carolina, in 1976. This most recent action could be interpreted to mean that Southern Baptists have shifted toward a position of recognizing the leadership abilities of women and of giving them an opportunity to use those abilities.³

First, the resolution did not "attack" the women's liberation movement, reading rather that "members of most women's liberation groups" attack "scriptural precepts of woman's place in society." Second, one is at loss to find reference in the resolution to the "domestic" view. Third, the phrase "woman is the glory of man" is cited to the resolution rather than to 1 Corinthians 11:7, its original source. To refer to 1 Corinthians 11:3, 7, as a "limited view" is somewhat condescending to Scripture. Finally, one finds no scientific or documented evidence attributing the 1976 election of Mrs. Carl Bates as convention vice-president as an attempt to counter a 1973 resolution.

Historically, one is hard put to present a case for Southern Baptist

women in teaching/ruling positions in their churches. In fact, in a quest for pastoral authority a number have left Southern Baptists to accept positions in other denominations, thereby bearing eloquent testimony that their commitment to Baptist doctrine was superseded by their desires to attain a particular ecclesiastical office. This illustrates a determination to be ruled by emotional and intuitive impulses, i.e., a “call,” instead of by the authority of the immutable written Word. In any case, though the practices of God’s people through the years deserve careful attention, tradition, without scriptural authority, is not binding.

Theological Evidence

Service to God can never be a purely private matter. The church does have a right and responsibility to examine the call of another. Jesus rebuked the church at Thyatira for letting Jezebel, who “called” herself a prophetess, teach (Rev. 2:20); whereas He commended the church at Ephesus for testing those who, though claiming to be apostles, were liars (Rev. 2:2). Thus, when a woman “feels called” to do a work that on scriptural grounds is both beyond God’s design in creation and in violation of His written Word, that work must be judged by the church. This is not for sociological but for theological reasons because the structure of both church and home portrays an image of the relationship which requires subordination between the God of the Old Testament and His covenant people and between Christ the Bridegroom and His bride the church. The imagery is highly important as a teaching tool—a message in itself to a spiritually impoverished world. By placing a woman in the teaching/ruling office, the church negates this truth taught by subjection of wives to husbands, i.e., that the church is subject to Christ, thereby destroying the image.⁴

Exegetical Considerations

Ultimately, neither supreme intelligence, unequalled logic, nor extraordinary gifts will settle this issue. Nor is it relevance; for what is relevant today may be irrelevant by the turn of the century. Nor are the principles which govern God’s two most important institutions to be changed at the whim of a cultural revolution. McBeth talks about a “new light” ushering in a “revolution in biblical studies.”⁵ Certainly a revolution is in progress, for that word denotes a fundamental change, especially overthrow or renunciation designed to effect fundamental changes in the socioeconomic situation as of a cultural segment. Its synonym is “rebellion.”⁶ But the question is not one of adaptation of Scripture through “new light” or “revolutionary concept” but rather this: “Has God spoken from eternity in His immutable written Word?” If He has not, then everyone is entitled to his/her own opinion, and all are equally valid. But, on the other hand, if God has spoken, one must examine what He has said and how it has been interpreted by the church for nearly two millennia. The secular presuppositions of the present age, together with one’s own assumptions and priorities, must continually be tested against the sure written Word of God (1 John 4:1).⁷

A Warning, 1 Timothy 2:8-15

On a cursory reading of Paul's words, some have jumped to the conclusion that women are to be excluded from church leadership. Such is what this writer terms the "neither shall ye touch it lest ye die" syndrome (cf. Gen. 3:3, in which the woman went further than the divine directive given, making God's command more restrictive). This common ploy prepares for disobedience by making the mandate appear foolish, severe, or impossible. Actually, Paul admonishes women to receive instruction quietly (encouraging both spiritual growth and intellectual acumen) and then forbids them to teach or exert authority over men (two different functions strangely bound together—neither task exclusively forbidden but both carefully defined as to boundaries).

Even if this restriction excludes women from certain aspects of religious leadership on the basis of gender alone, this is not a new or unusual way for God to work. God sets the general boundaries for religious leadership arbitrarily without regard for the individual's ability to perform the service involved. An interesting Old Testament analogy has been projected in an erudite article comparing the revolt of Korah against Moses and Aaron (Num. 16-18) to this present debate.

Under the old covenant the exclusion from the priesthood on the basis of gender/family/physical wholeness appears to be contradictory to the inclusive statement that "all Israel was to be a kingdom of priests" [Ex. 19:6]. Likewise under the new covenant exclusion limitations, such as those found in 1 Tim. 2:11-15, seem to fly in the face of the inclusive statement that "there is neither male nor female" in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).⁸

Frequently feminists disregard the directive in 1 Timothy 2:11 by a process of deculturalization, pointing to the lifting of holy hands as a posture for men when praying and to the prescribed wearing apparel with which women were to adorn themselves in the church assembly. This process of hermeneutical gymnastics does not, however, erase the meaning of the text. Consider first that these directives precede the verse in question as a general discussion of conduct and demeanor in church gatherings, following a discussion of public prayer—its subjects, purposes, and motive. Even in the matter of posture for prayer and guidelines for wearing apparel, there is obviously a timeless principle illustrated in a natural way. That natural manifestation could vary from generation to generation, but the principle should be considered an immutable word from God. This cannot be labeled "selective literalism,"⁹ but rather it is an effort to preserve the pure Word of God as enduring across cultures and throughout history and as appropriating itself from age to age with vigor and relevance.

For example, the phrase "holy hands" illustrates the principle governing an acceptable prayer in the assembly because it is an obvious reference to the spiritual condition of entire separation to God as manifested in a life of righteousness.¹⁰ In his remarks concerning the manner of dress for women attending worship services, Paul says nothing to discourage enhancing

beauty. Quite the contrary, the Greek words *kosmio*, translated “modest,” and *kosmein*, translated “adorn,” have been transliterated into English as “cosmetics.” As in parallel passages, the emphasis is upon commendation of modesty and propriety rather than upon a ban of tasteful accessories (1 Pet. 3:3-4). Thus, the underlying principle for women is to focus attention upon the inner self and the development of godliness with its pursuant outward manifestation of good works—a timely word in any generation.

Moving from appearance, which was to be an outward manifestation of what lay within, the apostle comes to the behavior of women within the church. Two distinct, yet related, activities are addressed in 1 Timothy 2:12, preceded by a general positive note which sets the stage for the restrictions to follow. Following the appeal for a modest appearance and faithful good works is a call for “silence” and submission (“subjection”). The Greek word translated “silence” (*hesuchia*) seems to denote “quietness” more than the idea of absence of sound, though both renderings are found in lexicons.¹¹ There is no suggestion that the injunction calls for a surrender of mind or conscience or private judgments; rather, it denotes a gentle and tranquil manner which goes hand in hand with submission (*hupotage*), literally an appointing, ordering, or arranging under. It is not an attitude that can be forced, as can obedience, but is rather a willingness to acquiesce to the will of another. Biblical submission is forever a self-imposed discipline. Men are not directed in Scripture to force or require submission.

To equate feminine submission with slavery is an emotional red herring at best and blatant distortion at worst. Even if one can make a case for Paul’s condoning slavery (the only textual evidence adduced would be the fact that Paul gives instructions for behavior of slaves toward masters, which may easily be explained as counsel for living the Christian life under adverse circumstances), one still finds no theological or exegetical requirement in Scripture for *continuing* slavery. However, the opposite is true concerning the subordination of women since the Scriptures declare that women are to be submissive because of the order of creation (1 Cor. 11:2-16; 1 Tim. 2:11-13).

Paul is not contending that women are to avoid teaching under any circumstances. This would be another “neither shall ye touch it lest ye die” ploy. Women did teach children (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15), instruct other women (Titus 2:3-4), and even occasionally privately share understandings with men (Acts 18:26).

Authentein, a difficult *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament, is defined by Piper as “a right and power given by the Spirit and confirmed by the church to give forceful instruction and exhortation to the church in doctrinal and ethical matters based on God’s Word.”¹² Paul’s prohibition is not simply against a woman’s willful usurpation of authority but also applies to her exercise of normal authority in the teaching office of the church. Paul does not say that a woman who usurps authority should not teach men but rather that a woman should neither teach nor exercise authority over men. Such teaching and authority are naturally tied to the pastoral office (1 Tim.

5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17).

Paul does not leave to conjecture whether this directive is for the first century alone. He rather grounds it in the divinely appointed relationship between man and woman from creation. These two passages are so inexorably linked that to dismiss the role relationships in the church as simply cultural would dismiss the analogous role relationship in marriage as also merely cultural.¹³ Thus, the theological matrix for this order in worship is the order of creation (Gen. 1-2),¹⁴ which established man's natural and spiritual headship. This, by any logic, precludes the view of those egalitarians who hold that male/female roles are a direct result of the fall. Paul does not absolve Adam of guilt, but he points to Eve's prior sin, which was not only a violation of the divine command concerning the forbidden fruit but also a reversal of divine order (Gen. 2:15-17).

A Reprimand, 1 Corinthians 14:33-35

In this passage Paul speaks authoritatively concerning spiritual gifts in the church. Again, the apostle emphasizes the divine order to be honored not only by speakers and prophets but also by women. The same Greek word, translated "permit," and the same present tense found in 1 Tim. 2:12 (*epitrepo*) are used by Paul to introduce this directive (*epitrepetai*). In verse 33 Paul adds "as in all the churches of the saints," a phrase which goes more naturally as introductory to verse 34, indicated by the punctuation of both the Nestle and Aland Greek texts,¹⁵ as well as so placed in numerous translations.¹⁶ Such construction certainly does not suggest a temporary or culturally-relative condition or happenstance but the straightforward statement of a general apostolic principle revealed in two different settings chosen by God "in the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4) as being most appropriate for transmitting His clear message.

Furthermore, in verse 34 the use of the article in conjunction with "law" implies more than mere custom but rather a connection to the commands of the Torah.¹⁷ Even more significant is the fact that this reference to the law in 1 Corinthians 14 is consistent with Paul's appeal to the Old Testament in both 1 Corinthians 11 (vv. 8-9 allude to the creation narrative in Gen. 2) and in 1 Timothy 2 (vv. 13-14 also allude to Gen. 2 and 3 as concerns creation and testing). Thus, the idea of male headship and female submission is clearly found in the Old and New Testaments as well as in the writings of both Paul and Peter.

Paul alludes to the matter of personal preferences and "relevant" interpretations with some pointed rhetorical questions (v. 36), making it clear that no one should suppose that he/she originated God's Word and order or that he/she has some new word from God contrary to the understanding and practices of the apostle and other churches with centuries of understanding and practice throughout the Christian era.

Obviously, the silence mandated for women in 1 Corinthians 14 does not exclude their vocal participation in worship services since both praying and prophesying are permitted (1 Cor. 11:15) with certain restrictions, spe-

cifically that the women not take charge of the worship service within the teaching/ruling function. This directive conforms to a universal practice in the early church. Grudem has done an exhaustive study comparing and contrasting the gifts of prophecy and teaching, in which he shows through an inductive study of the New Testament text itself that these two functions are distinct activities with authority differing according to who exercised the respective function. Grudem concluded that teaching (at least in a primary sense, i.e., from the apostles) rather than prophecy provided the doctrinal and ethical norms by which the early church was regulated. New Testament prophecy seems to be a human reporting of a divine revelation given to encourage, build up, comfort, and inspire (1 Cor. 14:3).¹⁸

Conclusion

To repeat, the real issue at hand is not ordination itself but the authority of the Bible. Nothing in Scripture infers that godly women assumed positions of authority over men in either the church or the home. Scripture does not permit a woman to be ordained as a ruling or teaching elder. Concerning the diaconate, the Scripture does not support ordination, but neither does it clearly prohibit a woman's serving in the diaconate, if following the New Testament pattern of this office. Subordination in the home, church, school, or marketplace has never abolished equality any more than equality has abolished subordination.

The more divine doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness. The modern cry: "Less creed and more liberty," is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish, and means less unity and less morality, and it means more heresy. . . . It is a positive and very hurtful sin to magnify liberty at the expense of doctrine.¹⁹

Even a lie, if told often enough, will soon be believed. A partial truth or truth taken out of context is even more dangerous (note Adam and Eve with Satan in the garden). Nowhere in Baptist history, except perhaps in this generation, has religious freedom come to mean that one can be a Baptist and believe and teach anything he personally desires.

There have appeared men in these later days who feel persecuted if they are not allowed to enter pulpits established to uphold a given set of principles, and there overthrow the very doctrines the church is set to defend But when he [a man in a denominational school] claims the right to use an institution, its money, prestige and opportunities to overthrow the faith which the institution was founded to build up, he passes the bounds of liberty and enters the realm of arrogant license.²⁰

The church has never sought to suppress gifts God has given but rather strives to ensure full and proper use of those gifts in a divinely given framework based upon natural order of creation and appropriateness of function within a master plan. One cannot accept the Bible as authoritative while rejecting its authority concerning home and church order. One cannot

negate truths concerning the structure of church and home, such as the image of the relationship between God and Israel and between Christ and the church, just to satisfy cultural whim or to accommodate higher plateaus of education and opportunity. One cannot lift outward manifestations, such as a man's prayer posture or a woman's head covering (1 Cor. 11), and use them to ridicule or belittle the timeless directives given to protect and edify men and women within the Kingdom.

Without doubt women did have a variety of positions of service, influence, and even leadership and teaching in the early church. The text of Scripture, however, bears witness that the functions they assumed were done with modesty and order (1 Cor. 11:2-16; 14:40), and that they did not teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 1 Cor. 14:33-35).

Endnotes

Dorothy Kelley Patterson, homemaker, Dallas, Texas, and teacher of seminars in womanhood and family living, presented this address at the annual meeting of the Historical Commission, SBC, and Southern Baptist Historical Society in Nashville, Tennessee, in April, 1988.

¹For example, cf. Donald W. and Lucille Sider Dayton, "Women As Preachers: Evangelical Precedents," *Christianity Today*, May 23, 1975, pp. 4-7, in which there is not a single documentation for the bold assertion that "Denominations in the National Association of Evangelicals have by and large ordained women earlier, in larger numbers, and more consistently than those in the National Council of Churches."

²*Annual*, Southern Baptist Convention, 1973, p. 87.

³Norman H. Letsinger, "The Status of Women in the Southern Baptist Convention in Historical Perspective," *Baptist History and Heritage*, 12:43, January, 1977.

⁴Elisabeth Elliot, "Why I Oppose the Ordination of Women," *Christianity Today*, June 6, 1975, p. 14.

⁵Leon McBeth, *Women in Baptist Life* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), p. 163.

⁶*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1976), p. 992.

⁷Elliot, p. 12.

⁸Ronald W. Pierce, "Male/Female Leadership and Korah's Revolt: An Analogy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 30:3-10, March, 1987.

⁹Alvera & Berkeley Mickelsen, "May Women Teach Men?" *The Standard*, April, 1984, p. 39.

¹⁰W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), p. 42.

¹¹Henry Thayer, "ἡσυχία," *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), p. 281.

¹²John Piper, "The Order of Creation," *The Standard*, April, 1984, p. 38.

¹³George W. Knight, III, "The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Male and Female with Special Reference to the Teaching/Ruling Functions in the Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 18:89, Spring, 1975.

¹⁴Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985). Though certainly no fundamentalists, these men have demonstrated in a scholarly way the literary unity of authorship for the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

¹⁵Eberhard Nestle, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (New York: American Bible Society, 1963), p. 451; Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983), p. 611.

¹⁶*Amplified New Testament*, p. 647; *Wuest's New Testament*, p. 410; *New English Bible*, Rotherham's *Emphasized New Testament*, Beck's *New Testament in the Language of Today*, *Twentieth Century New Testament*, Knox's *New Testament*. See Curtis Vaughan (ed.), *The New Testament From 26 Translations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), p. 778.

¹⁷David S. Dockery, "The Role of Women in Worship and Ministry," *Criswell Theological Review*, 1:370, Spring, 1987.

¹⁸Cf. Wayne Grudem, "Prophecy—Yes, But Teaching—No: Paul's Consistent Advocacy of Women's Participation Without Governing Authority," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 30:11-23, March, 1987.

¹⁹B. H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948), pp. 140-47.

²⁰J. B. Gambrell, *Ten Years in Texas* (Dallas: Baptist Standard Printing Co., 1909), p. 129.

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