

The Role of Women in the Church

Introduction: Richard H. Bube asked: “Why is it that different groups of Christians, each committed to faithful biblical exegesis, so often disagree?” (“Deduction vs. Induction: Understanding Differences Between Biblical Christians,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, Vol. 37, No. 4, December 1985, p. 195). One can think of many reasons: fallible human beings, “participants in an historical situation, a specific culture, an ethnic heritage, a political and economic milieu” (Bube, p. 196). But Bube says that what really makes a difference is “the *a priori* choice of one of two hermeneutical perspectives to the exclusion of the other: a deductive perspective as contrasted with an inductive perspective” (Bube, p. 196).

The **deductive perspective** takes specific texts, usually limited in number, and presents them as norms for all other texts on a given subject (for us it is the role of women in the church). From nine passages (1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:33-38; 1 Tim 2:8-15; Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18, 19; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Pet 3:1-7; 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) the deductive approach concludes: “The woman is subject to the man because the man, as created first, is directly in the image and glory of God, whereas the woman, created after the man and for him, is the glory of the man. Because of her lesser endowment (presumably) she was deceived by the Tempter whereas the man was not. Therefore she should never aspire to teach the man, but always learn from him in subjection and quiet humility. This means that the woman is subordinate to the man in the family and in the church. This does not imply that the woman is inferior to the man, but that in following this subordination she fulfills the order of creation as intended by God. The woman is complementary in leadership, but subordinate in government.” (Bube, p. 202)

In contrast the **inductionist’s perspective** approaches the text in all its particulars looking at the actual roles described for women in the New Testament and from the particulars draws conclusions accordingly.

For instance, in the Gospels women play a major role in the ministry of Jesus, notwithstanding the status of the apostles. Jesus broke many traditions in regard to women: by speaking to the Samaritan woman, who as a consequence became the first “evangelist” in Samaria (her testimony); by insisting that Mary remain a “learner” (Lk 10:38-42); by rejection of the “double standard” between men and women (Matt 5:27-28; Matt 19:3-9 and possibly Jn 8:2-11); by recognition of a religious outcast woman as a “real person” (Lk 8:43-48); by accepting the financial support of women (Lk 8:1-3); by blessing the woman who had insights of his impending passion (Mk 14:3-9); and the first confession of Jesus as Messiah in John’s Gospel (Jn 11:25-27). Furthermore, Jesus appeared first to the women after his resurrection.

Beyond the Gospel materials the New Testament gives the picture of women very active in the church's ministry: as prophets (Acts 2:17-18) - Philip's daughters (Acts 21:8, 9); Corinthian women (1 Cor 11:4-5), and Jezebel, a false prophet (Rev 2:20); as "co-workers" with Paul - "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks" (Rom 16:3, 4 RSV); "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these *women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel* along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" (Phil 4:2, NIV, my emphasis); as an apostle (missionary?) - "Greet Andronicus and Junia(s), my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was" (Rom 16:7, NIV) [Note: This has a textual problem but my interpretation of it is that they are a husband and wife team that have worked very similarly as the apostles and their wives and hence are given the name "apostle." Both Barnabas and Epaphroditus are called "apostles."]; as teacher of an adult male - "And he (Apolllos) began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when *Priscilla* and Aquila heard him they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26, NASV, my emphasis); as evangelists (bearers of good news) - Jn 4:39; cp. Jn 17:20; 20:18; Matt 28:9, 10; Mk 16:7; Lk 24:10; as a deacon (minister, servant) and leader - "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (*diakonon*) of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help (*prostatis*) to many people including me" (Rom 16:1, NIV). Note that the NEB translates the verse: "I commend to you Phoebe, a fellow-Christian who holds office in the congregation at Cenchreae...for she has been a good friend to many." Perhaps 1 Tim 3:11 refers to a woman as a deacon: "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things." (Some say "woman" should be "wife.")

Besides these, Lydia was the first convert in Macedonia and she became the hostess of a church meeting in her house (Acts 16:15, 40). Euodia and Syntyche have already been mentioned in regard to this church (Phil 4:2). It is not insignificant that Luke records that "leading women" and "not a few Greek women of high standing" were brought into the Gentile church from Thessalonica and Beroea (Acts 17:4, 12).

The inductionist also will note that Gen 1:26, 27 presents man, as both male and female, created in God's image with joint responsibilities for the earth. The subordination of woman to man comes only after "the fall" and should be considered overcome (at least to some degree!) in Christ (Gal 3:28; cp. 1 Cor 11:11, 12). Both men and women are to respond to the Spirit's gifting and empowering. Both men and women are responsible to exercise and use their spiritual gifts for the benefit of all the body of Christ.

The inductionist, therefore, will view the select passages such as 1 Cor 14:33-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-15 as Paul's response to some immature Christian women. In Corinth these "women" are the third group exhorted to "sit down and be quiet"! At Ephesus it seems an even more difficult group of "women" were "acting for themselves alone" (*authentain*); i.e., they were to stop teaching, until they brought their knowledge and their behavior in line with Timothy's "sound doctrine" and example.

The inductionist approach cannot take the texts above as normative for the church, especially in light of the actual description of women's role in ministry throughout the New Testament. It is interesting the way Paul uses the verb *kopiaio* ("hard labor"). The term seems to have become an idiom for the hard labor of preaching and teaching (*kopiontes*) [1 Tim 5:17]. This same term is used of women in Rom 16:6: "Greet Mary, who *has worked hard* among you," and 16:12: "Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who *has worked hard* in the Lord" (my emphasis!). **How can such statements be made if Paul considered his mandates in I Corinthians and I Timothy as normative?** It seems best to treat them as special problems in the church, the principles which still prevail for today.

Conclusion: It seems that the best solution to this problem is to do our best to integrate the two hermeneutical approaches: deductive and inductive. This means taking very seriously the particular texts on the subject and at the same time considering all the New Testament presents to us.

My personal view of women's role in the church is this: To the men God has given the role of shepherding (bishops, elders). My only explanation for this is that it is similar to man being the "head" of his wife, not in some kind of authority figure or "chain of command theory," but as the life-giver to the family and overall shepherd. Indeed, if a man cannot care for his own family, how can he care for the family of God? But beyond that, there is no limit to our ministries for God by both men and women. In fact, I believe it is imperative that we exercise the spiritual gifts God's Spirit has given to us, male or female. Paul's restraints are due to his consciousness of how the culture in which he was working viewed the role or activity of women to be insubordinate. "Conversely, any roles that was not viewed as inappropriate by the culture was permitted by Paul" (Sigountas and Shank). This, I believe, accounts for the great deal of freedom in ministry experienced by women in the early church as well as Paul's few restraints as discussed. [These views are personal and do not necessarily receive endorsement by LCC/S.]

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