
The Ministry of Women

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H. A. Ironside

Dr. Harry A. Ironside was an internationally beloved Bible teacher and preacher. During his 50 years of ministry he, among other things, authored more than 60 books, in addition to numerous pamphlets and articles on Bible subjects.

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The question as to the place and scope for the public ministry of women is one that occupies rather a prominent place in the minds of many at the present time.

Undoubtedly there have come to the front in Christian testimony many very devoted and godly women who have marked gift and ability in opening up the Scriptures, and to numbers of God's people it seems unthinkable that their ministry should be in any sense restricted. Are their minds not fully as good as those of any of their brethren? As to the ability for public utterance, are they not fully the equals of their brothers in Christ? Is it, then, true that the Word of God actually limits their testimony in a way that it does not limit those of men?

It is important that all of us realize that it is not for us to decide what our work for Christ is to be. We are told that the Holy Spirit divideth "to every man severally as He will" (**1 Cor. 12:11**), and that it is He who, through the written Word, has given instruction as to where and how such gifts should be used. In the fourteenth chapter of 1

Corinthians, for instance, we have very clear and definite instruction as to the use of the gift of tongues, once very prominent in the Christian church. Also, the same chapter makes clear the place of the prophet, that is, the one speaks to edification, to exhortation, and to comfort in the assembly of God.

As we come toward the close of that chapter, we are met by two verses that many seem disposed to reject or else to attempt to explain away. The apostle says: "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law" (v. 34). Now just what did the apostle mean by these words? Some have thought that he meant that they were not to use the gift of tongues in public, even though they possessed that gift. This might appear to be a true meaning to the words, and yet it seems clear that they must have a wider application even than that, for the apostle says so definitely: "Let your women keep silence in the churches." Then he goes on to say that, "if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home" (v. 35).

In trying to understand a passage of this kind, one needs to have before him as a background something of the actual conditions of the times in which the letter was written, and the people to whom it was written. Corinth was notoriously a city of gross immorality and great looseness of behaviour. It was said if one were guilty of any excessive violation of the moral law, that he "corinthianized," and naturally the Christian women of that city would be subject to a great deal of suspicion if they allowed themselves the full liberty in public which some women might have felt free to take in other places. The apostle says: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (**1 Cor. 14:40**). This might be translated: "Let all

things be done respectably and by arrangement.” One can understand that what might be respectable in Jerusalem might not be respectable in Corinth. What might be agreeable to public taste in Rome might not be suitable in Antioch. What the apostle is evidently telling us is that we are to take into consideration the customs of the people where we dwell.

The same thing is true today. There are certain customs in different parts of the world which differ very radically from those that we are used to here in America. There was a very devoted lady who caused great scandal in the minds of her fellow-missionaries in Columbia, South America, because she insisted on going out into public parks and sitting down beside almost anyone she might find there, to talk to them about the Gospel, whether it was a man or a woman. Her fellow-missionaries were greatly troubled because, they said, this reflected them all: nobody in that community but a loose, immoral woman would ever take such liberties; and, therefore, the people would naturally conclude that these Protestant Christian women were of a very bad character. So we can understand what the apostle meant when he said: “Do all things respectably and by arrangement,” that is, coming together and deciding what would be the most suitable thing.

With this in view, let us remember that many of these Christian women of apostolic days had been, or were, slaves, and that many others were members of pagan families. They had never enjoyed the liberty that was theirs in the Christian company, a liberty which, with the very best of intentions, perhaps, they were inclined to misuse. So the apostle, by the Spirit of God, lays down some very definite rules.

In the interest of godly order in the assembly, it is

important to bear in mind the place that God has given to men, and the place that he has given to women in the order of nature. Of course, we know that in the new creation there is no difference — no difference between Jew and Greek, between cultured and uncultured, between male and female — but this is not true in nature. In nature we all have our own places and positions to fulfill, and so God Himself has ordained that, in the public ministry of the Word, when His people are gathered together for worship and prayer and intercession, men should deliver His message to the assembly. Therefore, He says: “Let your women keep silence in the assembly,” that is, in the church, but He is not referring to a building. It is not, as some have thought, that when one enters or participates in a service in a building which we call a church, the women must be in silence; but when the Christian company is gathered together in its capacity as the assembly of God, men are God’s chosen instruments to minister His Word. If questions arise that women do not understand, they are not to interrupt by asking for an explanation, but are to wait until they get home and ask their husbands, or literally, their men at home. It is not permitted unto them to arise and address the audience or speak.

Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul says: “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man” (**1 Tim. 2:12**). It is didactic teaching, or taking the place of the official teacher, that he has in mind. There is nothing here that touches the question of a woman’s acting as teacher in her own sphere. In the Epistle to Titus, the aged women are told to teach the younger women, and the younger women are to teach their children; and in the book of The Acts we read of a godly woman, Priscilla, instructing even so eminent a servant of the Lord as Apollos, opening up to him in a private way the truth of God more perfectly (**Acts**

18:24-26). It will be noticed that in almost every case where this lady and her husband are mentioned, her name precedes his; at least this is so in the best manuscripts, which would indicate that she was the one who had the better understanding of the Word, or the greater ability to set it forth clearly. Neither was Apollos above receiving instruction from this devoted and godly woman.

There are many spheres of service for women indicated in Scripture. Phebe was a servant, or a deaconess, of the church at Cenchrea. Just what her duties were we are not told, but there are always many things connected with any Christian assembly where a woman can serve with helpfulness. A woman acted as an evangelist to the men of Sychar, to whom she said: "Come, see a man which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (**John 4:29**). The risen Lord Himself sent special messages by the women who came to the sepulchre, which they were to carry to the disciples, making known His mind and will to them. The Scriptures tell of Dorcas, whose service was a most valuable one, and we read in the fourth chapter of Philippians of two women who, unfortunately, at the time that Paul wrote, had fallen out insofar as fellowship with one another was concerned. I refer to Euodias and Syntyche, of whom Paul says they "labored with me in the Gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlaborers, whose names are in the book of life" (v. 3).

Now in view of what Paul has written in **1 Corinthians 14** and again in **1 Timothy 2**, we may justly conclude that these women did not share the public platform with the Apostle Paul. No one would imagine that Paul sat in the audience, or sat to one side on the platform, while either Euodias or Syntyche did the preaching. But there are many, many lines of service that a woman can carry on in which men have no real part. Take, for instance, what is

commonly known as Zenana work in India. It is quite unthinkable over there that men should penetrate into the women's enclosures in the homes and talk to them, and so we have Zenana-workers, godly women who can go from home to home and talk with women and open up to them the precious truths of the Gospel.

Then, it is evident, from **1 Corinthians 11**, that there were certain less formal gatherings in the early church where women were perfectly free to take part in both public prayer and in public testimony. Otherwise, there would be little reason for the Apostle Paul to give the instruction which he does give concerning women having their heads covered while praying or prophesying. Remembering that to prophesy is to speak unto men to edification, to exhortation, and to comfort, we cannot but recognize the fact that these women had messages from God which they could give, even in the presence of their brethren, but they could not proclaim them in the regular assembly of the saints. And as they took their part in these less formal services, they were to be careful of modest behaviour. They were to see that their attire, even to the veiling of the head, was such that no reproach could be brought upon the testimony of Christ. In Corinth, an unveiled woman appearing in public was immediately branded as an immoral woman, and Christian women were to avoid any such occasion for misunderstanding.

I hope that nothing said here would seem to indicate that one would attempt to impose any legal restrictions upon gifted women and hinder them from using their gifts to the glory of God. Women should rather, it seems to me, give God thanks that He has not put upon them the heavy responsibilities that rest upon pastors and elders in the church. And right here, let me point out that nowhere in the New Testament do we read of a woman having the

place of a pastor or an elder.

Elders' families are mentioned, but no such person comes before us, in the New Testament, as a woman having the care of the public assembly.

Another point is this: in God's dispensational ways with men, He often recognizes the fact of failures having come in. God can transcend, as it were, His own rules, if I may put it that way, by honoring and using that which ordinarily would not be in full accordance with His Word. For instance, go back into the days of the judges in the Old Testament times. When there was no king of Israel, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes, when it seemed as though there was no man in Israel who could take the responsibility of guiding and directing His people, God raised up and used Deborah, a devoted woman, and through her brought deliverance to His afflicted people.

This brings to mind an incident which occurred some little time ago. Two very devoted and earnest servants of Christ were on their way home from a meeting one night in a large city. As they came along, they found two women holding a street meeting, with a great crowd of men gathered about them. One of these brethren turned to the other, and said: "What a shame, to see women taking such a public place, so contrary to the Word of God!" The other, turning to him, replied: "My dear brother, they are where they are because you and I are not there." God was going to have a testimony, you see, to those people, and as there were no men there to give it, He used those women.

I do not think that there is anything contrary to Scripture in any woman's using her gift as an evangelist or as a missionary to the heathen world, or as giving out the Gospel in any way, other than simply taking over the

regular public church meeting.

There does not need to be any difficulty in regard, for instance, to young people's meetings and Sunday school groups. All of these are outside of the regular assembly of the saints, and furnish abundant room for godly women to use their gifts in accordance with the Word of God.

Sometimes, when we speak of the Scriptural limitation to the ministry of women, we are met by the objection: "Well, but where women do take this very public place, apparently in direct opposition to these plain Scriptures, **1 Corinthians 14** and **1 Timothy 2**, the blessing of God rests upon them, souls are saved, and really a great work for God carried on. What about this?" We have only to say that God is sovereign, and wherever His Word is preached, He will honor that Word. This does not necessarily say that He endorses the manner in which it is given out, or the attitude of the persons who proclaim it. The great thing for each of us is to seek to be subject to what God has clearly revealed, and we can be assured that when we stand at the judgment seat of Christ, we will be rewarded according to our faithfulness to the revelation that He has given.
