

A Non-Feminist Apology for Women in Ministry

by Pastor Marty

For some people, this newsletter will be a non-issue because they have already made up their minds on the idea of women in ministry. It has been an issue that ministries, churches, and denominations have argued over for hundreds of years, and this newsletter is not going to answer every potential question or objection. There are more than enough books written on the subject to provide every possible viewpoint and argument for and against women being in ministry, both inside and outside the Church, both visible and invisible. With that being the case, you may wonder what else can be said. I am certainly not an expert on the issue, either from a biblical studies or from a church history point of view; there are plenty of books written by pastors and scholars that provide insights from those fields, many of which I have read. In all the books I have read, however, there has been—to some degree or another—a tendency to dismiss or underplay the opposing objections by applying very specific meanings to passages in Scripture. The problem is that some of these qualifications seemed contrived. Nevertheless, there are Bible verses that seem to support each side of the issue. If Scripture is inspired, then there is an answer within Scripture that addresses both perspectives fully and faithfully.

If Scripture is inspired, it holds the answer to faithfully address both sides.

The first thing you will notice about this newsletter is the wording of the title: it is a “non-feminist apology” for women in ministry. I choose the word “apology” both in its historical context—as a defense and explanation—and in its vernacular understanding—an expression of regret that some will be offended or discover that a sincerely held belief may be incorrect. I say this because I consider both camps to have

some errors in their positions. (If you wonder how both sides can be wrong, you will just have to read the rest of the newsletter). I also specify that this is not a feminist approach to the issue. In a couple of my previous newsletters, I have mentioned some weaknesses and errors within feminism as it is commonly understood today. To be clear, I am not contrary to the concept of examining or discussing any issue in light of its effect on a specific portion of the population, especially when we are referring to half of the human race! There are times when recognizing how a specific issue applies to men, women, children, rich, poor, educated, illiterate, or any other category is useful. However, some presuppositions and methodologies of specific theologies may be based on very admirable motivations but still do more harm than good.

Sometimes, our presuppositions and our methodologies do more harm than good.

As I have mentioned previously, there is a weakness in much feminist theology: it aims to negate or dismiss any inherent differences or distinctions between male and female. Women and men are made in the image of God, and we have both masculine and feminine aspects to our human natures—aspects that are grounded in eternal truths. Of course, there is no denying that we live in a fallen world, so there is bound to be inequality and oppression throughout the history of humanity—of which racism, sexism, slavery, and human trafficking are only a few of an endless list of injustices. Feminism, ideally, identifies numerous ways in which women have been mistreated throughout history up through the present in order to address faulty concepts and correct them. The problem arises when it tries to do that not by elevating those gifts and abilities that are feminine but by negating any

distinction between gender and the sexes. The argument that says men and women are equal in every way does a major disservice to both women and men by negating the strengths that each possess. The issue of women in ministry is often associated with the issue of male/female without recognizing that there are special gifts and abilities associated with the true masculine and the true feminine within all of us—as we allow God to fully develop them. A Truly Godly and informed feminism would argue not that men and women are the same but instead that those gifts that are inherently feminine are just as valuable as the gifts that are truly masculine; in other words, it would affirm the differences between the genders instead of negating them.

True feminism affirms the differences between the genders, not negates them.

On one side of the issue, some verses in the New Testament suggest women cannot be leaders in the Church—or in any position over men. For this discussion, I will mainly deal with leadership in the Church, for it will cover the other questions; I plan on addressing 3 specific Scripture passages because that will not only faithfully represent the position but also fulfill Paul’s requirement that an argument must be supported by 2 or 3 examples. Paul says, “The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church” (1 Cor 14:34-35). To be honest, this passage itself is such a strong prohibition against women in leadership that we almost do not need to look at any other passages; however, Paul gives Timothy advice that is very significant: “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Tim 2:11-12). Between these first two verses, it

seems the issue is closed; however, we find a third passage by Peter: “In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior” (1 Pet 3:1-2). Although other verses mention headship, they fit into the same category. It seems Peter and Paul do prohibit women as Church leaders.

Based on a straightforward reading of these verses, women cannot be leaders.

If these were the only Bible verses on the subject of women in ministry, the issue would be closed. However, there are other verses on the subject. As any faithful reader of the Bible will agree, the best commentary on Scripture is Scripture. Before looking at other verses to see if there are differing views on the issue, however, we must consider what these verses say. The problem with most responses to these verses, in my opinion, is that they tend to explain them away. I have read and heard the entire gamut, from Paul (and even Jesus) being misogynistic to it being entirely cultural for only that time period to it being dependent on specific problems taking place in Corinth. Now, I am not dismissing the actual information gained from scholarly research on the culture and the time period; however, if our conclusion is that these passages are no longer applicable for our day and age, then it does raise concerns about where we draw the line. The objection to this concern is that the “slippery slope” defense is not a valid argument because it only leads to legalism and fundamentalism (in the negative sense of the word). Both arguments here have validity: once we make ourselves the judge of Scripture, no doctrine is entirely safe; however, not every change in interpretation is heresy.

A slippery slope argument should not be used—or dismissed—without great care.

Again, if these were the only scriptures on the issue, we could say the question has been answered sufficiently. However, ignoring other passages because they interfere with our theology is never a good idea. On the other side of the issue, we find passages that seem to very clearly contradict our first conclusion—which is a problem because God does not lie, so when we see a contradiction in Scripture, it is on our side, not His. He may do different things with different people, but if He identifies something as right or wrong, He is consistent. In light of our subject, we have to take note that Deborah was a Judge in Israel, as seen in Judges 4-5. It is vital that we recognize that this was the highest position of leadership in the entire nation of Israel at the time, and it was God Himself that appointed Deborah, making her both Judge and Prophetess. This required being a leader over men and women and speaking to them with an aura of authority. If God had not meant women to be in leadership, He would not have chosen a woman to be the leader of His people. Women are prophetesses in both the Old and New Testaments, and this required speaking to people—and the congregation—with authority.

God appointed women as Prophets and Judges, which were leadership roles.

We also see the spousal team of Priscilla and Aquila listed numerous times in Acts 18 and in Paul's letter to Rome, mentioned in the context of serving, leading, and teaching. Paul mentions both men and women in his letter to Timothy when he is listing the requirements for deacons, and although it is possible that he is describing wives of deacons, that interpretation is not absolutely certain—especially when we read in Romans 16:1 that he mentions Phoebe as a deaconess, and the context of the verse indicates she is the one deserving the title of leadership and respect. Although there are no absolute statements that clearly place women in leadership to the same extent as the verses

we first considered that seem to exclude them, there are sufficient passages to make us stop and take a closer look at what might be taking place. Again, God is neither schizophrenic nor arbitrary, so He is very intentional about what He does. Nevertheless, these latter examples do not negate the first verses, so we are still left with a very significant question: why would God appoint women as leaders if He designed male and female so that only men are leaders?

If God does not want women as leaders, why did He put women in that position?

My answer to this question is one that I have never heard or read in any book on the subject, and it is based on the life of Ruth. The first thing we find out about Ruth is that she is a Moabite. Now, anybody who has read the Old Testament closely will realize that God was not very happy with the Moabites. In Numbers 25 we find that women from the nation of Moab led Israel into idolatry and Baal worship, which became one of their most lasting sins. Because of that, God decreed that no Moabite or even a descendent of Moab will ever be allowed into the congregation of Israel (Deut 23:3). Even a cursory reading of the verse makes it clear that God is extremely serious about that exclusion. However, we find in the book of Ruth that God not only accepts Ruth into the congregation of Israel and gives her favor but also makes her the great-grandmother to David—the greatest king who ever ruled over Israel. God saw in her something that led Him to make an exception for Ruth ... to accept her when there was every reason not to do so. He looked beyond her genetics and saw her heart. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we find this is a clear and recurring principle: God chooses to use those people everyone else is most likely to reject, and He uses them in amazing ways.

God chooses to use people we consider to have the least chance of being used.

If this is a trustworthy principle, then we need to examine how it could apply to women in ministry. Clearly, the first passages we read would seem to indicate that women were not leaders in the Church; however, the same Paul who wrote those verses also listed Priscilla and Phoebe as deacons in ministry and described the qualifications for deacons, giving them for both men and women. There are sufficient verses in the New Testament to support some type of headship for male and female, but the same Holy Spirit to inspire those verses also anointed Deborah to be Judge and Prophetess over Israel, in the highest position of authority that was possible. Both Joel and Paul mention women prophesying, and Paul describes the gift of prophecy as involving a level of authority. Although the “Ruth principle” explains how God has favor on individuals—choosing people that everyone else identifies as having every reason NOT to be used by Him—how does that relate to an entire segment of the population when we discuss women and ministry? I suggest that in both cases, God is superseding environment.

God looks past nature and environment to choose people otherwise inadmissible.

I have not done a great deal of research on the cultural practices and lifestyles of people in New Testament times, but there are things we can learn from reading the Bible. In the Old Testament, we mainly see men as leaders and heads of the families in Israel. For that time and culture, it was the norm. However, any cursory reading finds women who stood out and were used by God in significant ways. Also, Proverbs 31 reveals that a Godly woman is involved in business (and even politics) in a way that brings respect and admiration from everyone around her—including her husband. I believe what God is showing us here is the difference between what may be normal for the culture of the time and what He actually desires for His people. As we see in Isaiah, He asked who would go for

Him, and He sent the one who said, “I will.” All through the Old Testament, God calls out for people who will seek Him, and He rejoices over the remnant who live differently than the rest. Because this is the case, we often see two streams of prophetic messages spoken to the same group of people: courage and hope to those who obey along with judgment and rebuke to those who rebel. There were two types of people within Israel, so the message would usually be geared to the target audience.

God often speaks two different messages delivered to the same group of people.

My suspicion is that what we see in the New Testament with the verses that prohibit women from ministry is God speaking to those accustomed to the normal family dynamics in Roman households where leadership positions would not be an option. For the most part, the women loved the Lord and were faithful, but they would not have known how to lead with integrity and humility and in affirmation of their true feminine gifts. The passages addressed to women in the New Testament suggest that the majority followed the lifestyle of their culture and were not prepared to be servant leaders. However, we know there were some who were different than the rest because we read about them in Acts and Paul’s epistles. In the Old Testament, all women were encouraged to be like Proverbs 31, but what we actually find is only some who truly stood out and were written about, such as Sarah, Ruth, Deborah, Hannah, and others. Maybe there were not more, not because God was not calling more to stand up but because more did not respond; maybe most of them only knew how to live what was for them a normal life. Perhaps when Peter and Paul wrote that women could not be leaders or teachers, it was because, according to what was normal, the average women could not be; however, we see God indeed use those who, like Isaiah, said, “Here am I; send me.”