

Article of the Month – December 2008

Women in (Missions) Ministry

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The topic of women in (missions) ministry has caused much debate. Before World War II it was assumed that women should be in submission to men, did not minister the Word and were hardly seen in leadership roles. At first glance there seemed to be a Biblical legitimacy to this. In the past half century these discussions have sharpened and an evaluation of traditional assumptions versus newer counter-arguments seems necessary. It is another topic under the category of 'Bible & Culture' – and as such is missions-related.

I approach this topic with three 'keys of understanding'. The *first* is *culture*, a negotiable, because it differs much, depending on era and area. The *second* is *Godly creation-order*, and therefore non-negotiable, independent of external circumstances. *Finally*, it is important that the *spirit of the text* should be discovered, the deep underlying intentions, instead of superficially reading the literal text without such deliberation. When these keys are handled properly, little will remain to fight over.

The *cultural key* could be called '*Flexibility in Changeable Secondary Issues*'. First we must assess what Paul's and Peter's words¹ meant to their *original readers* in the 1st century Roman Empire. Then we should check in what ways that culture differs from our own and what its message is for *our* time and culture. In this way we don't discard their words, but try to understand them in the *context of our era and area*. This is necessary, lest we sink into interpretational irrelevancies that obscure the message for today.

When we read 1 Cor. 11 *we* would answer Paul's questions different from how *he* does. E.g. in our time it cannot be considered improper for a woman to have short hair or go to church without a hat. And although long hair for a man would be considered disputable in some circles, most would agree that calling it 'dishonorable' is a bit far-fetched.

In Jewish-orthodox culture long hair for men was and is commonly accepted. This shows that Paul in his letters had 1st century *Roman* culture in mind, rather than 1st century *Jewish* culture. We deal here with *cultural issues* that only have to do with externals.

Next comes the issue that women have to remain silent in church. Paul cannot have meant that in an absolute sense, because he allows men *and* women to pray, to prophesy and to speak in tongues. Since women were usually less educated, there were relatively more things they did not understand. That was fine, as long as they did not interrupt the service by asking questions aloud. Paul advises to rather ask questions at home. The

¹ 1 Cor. 11:3-7,11-15; 14:26,33,34,35,39,40; Ef. 5:21-24,32,33; 1 Tim. 2:8-12; 1 Pet. 3:1a,3-7

disgrace he mentions is found more in the interruption of events than in the speaking itself. Meetings should be orderly and everyone, also women, were allowed to participate. Also the passage in Timothy has cultural aspects: the lifting up of hands, hair-dress, clothing, wearing of jewels and teaching (the latter is nowadays commonly accepted, based on education and experience, and therefore should not be rejected in church).

What is generally considered respectable and decent in one's culture, does not automatically become disrespectable or indecent at the moment one steps into church.

The *second* key is about *Godly creation-order and moral immutabilities*: God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the Church (with man as first responsible); man is the head of woman. Because of this context there is no threat to the value or position of woman. This order offers her protection and security. Female attempts at breaking this order is as ridiculous as a man trying to usurp Christ's position as head of the Church. After all, there has to be one who carries the final responsibility and has the authority to take decisions when no consensus can be reached. That person however, is accountable to Him Who has been placed over him by Godly creation-order.

The rule of thumb is to not offend Christians with different opinions, especially those whose lack of insight in these things would have been classified by Paul as 'weak'.

Peter's passage shows that *inner beauty* is the norm. That is the *third* key. It is about how we behave, men as well as women and about showing the spiritual fruit of Christ's love in our lives. In such an attitude there is no place for dominance of one over another. Do we desire a meek, gentle spirit in our wives? Well, Christ expects the same of us.

Rather than criticizing women because of certain roles (seemingly more important than our own), we should treat them with love, respect and appreciation. When we do, the differences we used to fight about will grow dim. Besides, what Christian woman would not love to submit to the leadership of men who really act in the Spirit of Christ?

Now back to missions. When apostles travel they 'have the right to take a believing wife with them'.² How likely is it that these women left their families, spent money on travel, just to keep their husbands company? Or would they have come along to minister? How would they minister by 'remaining silent in church'? When Paul calls his relatives Andronicus and Junia (not Junias, the male form of the name) 'outstanding among the apostles' and 'having been in prison' with him³, how likely then is the possibility that this woman apostle was in prison for 'remaining silent'? And what about his many other female co-workers Apphia, Euodia, Syntyche, Mary, Persis, Phoebe, Tryphena and Tryphosa? Let's think twice before we tell women to remain silent. Do they not minister on the mission fields of the world, in larger quantities than men do?

² 1 Cor. 9:5

³ Rom. 16:7

