

The Place of Women in the Church

By Prof. Robert D. Decker

From where has the problem of the place of women in the church arisen? That this is a problem no one will deny. The Synods and General Assemblies of the churches have been very busy with this question in recent years. The Theological Journals and church magazines carry many articles both pro and con though mostly pro and several books have appeared on the subject. Women are enrolling in increasing numbers in the seminaries and some churches are ordaining them into the ministry and other offices. But the question persists, why? Why all the controversy over this question? For many centuries this was never a problem. The church simply assumed that the office was limited to men.

The answer very simply is this: Compromise! The church once more has accommodated itself to the world. We live in the day of “women’s liberation”, women’s rights, and the feminist movement. Women are clamoring for equality and seeking their fulfillment not in the home, not in rearing a family, but in the professions and jobs of the work-a-day world. The world says wives are not subject to their own husbands and need not obey them. The world says marriage is a fifty-fifty proposition and the world says women may rule over men. And much of the church has caved in to the pressures of the world and compromised so that now all of a sudden we need women officebearers; ministers, elders, and deacons.

But there is the problem! The Bible, in plain language which even a child can understand, expressly forbids women from serving as ministers or rulers in the church. Careful, believing exposition will yield no other conclusion. Thus those who advocate that women be in office in the church are forced to deny that the Scriptures apply in our times and culture. They say that when Paul wrote: “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence.” (I Tim. 2:12) was influenced by his rabbinical training and background. Or they say this word applied in that early New Testament day but it does not apply in our culture.

Hence another and much more serious concession is made, this time to the modern, liberal denial of the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible itself. It is couched in high-sounding theological jargon. We are told that the Bible is time bound or culturally conditioned. We must understand that the Bible speaks to its times. It is our tasks today to discover how the Bible applies to our times. Or, we are told, we must get at the basic meaning of the words themselves by following the rules and methods of the “new hermeneutic.” All this is simply a denial of the most fundamental tenet of our faith, the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible. With these views one can make the Bible say anything, support any heresy, deny any truth. And this is precisely what is happening in our day.

The fact remains, however, that the Bible expressly forbids women from serving in office in the church. This is clear from I Corinthians 14:34, 35: “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. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” This passage is so utterly simple it hardly needs explanation. The women must keep silence in the churches; she is not allowed to speak. That speaking must be taken in the sense of preaching and teaching in God’s church. This the woman is not allowed to do. It is not at all unlikely that among the other abuses in the Corinthian church the woman was being allowed to participate in the leading of worship. This not to be permitted for the woman is commanded by God’s law to be under obedience. Hence, let the women keep silence in the churches! Indeed it is a shame for women to speak in the churches, a shame mind you!

We find this same truth in I Timothy 2:11, 12: “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” The Apostle is speaking of the official worship of the church of Jesus Christ. The Church, its offices, its worship, the various qualifications for office, the duties of ministers, elders, and deacons, all these are the subjects of this first Letter to Timothy. This means the Apostle is not speaking of the woman’s place in the home, in society, but of her calling in the church. The woman, for example, must teach and rule her children. The Word, therefore, “I suffer not a woman to teach” means in the church. The woman is forbidden to occupy the pulpit. She may not be ordained into the office of the ministry of the Word.

Nor may the woman usurp authority over the man. The term, "usurp authority" means literally: "to act on one's own authority, to be autocratic." Again the Scripture means in the church. The woman may not occupy the ruling office of Christ in the church, that of the bishop or elder. The woman who does is a usurper! She acts on her own authority, not on God's. Rather the woman must learn in silence with all subjection. She must learn the truth and grow in the knowledge of God by means of the preaching of the Word. She must learn in silence, literally in quietness. This means a bit more than just not talking. In quietness means the woman must tend to her own affairs and in her own God-given place and task she must learn. The woman must not meddle into the affairs which God had assigned to the men of the church. Still more, she must learn in silence with all subjection. Subjection is obedience and all subjection is total obedience. In this way the woman must learn in silence.

The reason for this is given in verses 13 and 14. Adam was first formed then Eve. This means the woman was made for the man and not the man for the woman. And, Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. This does not mean that Adam did not fall into sin. But Adam was not deceived in the way that the woman was deceived. The woman was utterly and completely deceived. She was the leader in the fall and became the occasion for Adam to fall. The woman listened to the devil and talked with him. As a consequence God said: "Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee." (Genesis 3:16). Therefore the woman must neither teach nor rule in the church.

Verse fifteen of this chapter call women to their proper place and task. And that is childbearing! "She shall be saved in childbearing." This needs all the emphasis we can give it in our day! Childbearing includes the actual conception and bearing of children and all the rearing of them in God's fear. God gives the women of the church ample opportunity to teach and to rule. They must teach and rule their little ones in the fear of His Name.

What a glorious task that is! What a beautiful place God has given the women of the church! In this way God's church is born into the world and gathered. In this way Christ was born. He was born of a woman and God did not need a man. Can there be anything more wonderful than to be used of God for the building of His church? Childbearing! Unto this end God blesses the woman with many gifts and virtues, fits her physically and emotionally. What a heinous sin when women and men with them refuse that calling and refuse to bear children. The judgement of God rests upon them.

Through that childbearing the woman shall be saved! She shall be saved by the blood of Christ through faith, but not in the way of preaching and teaching in the church, but in the way of childbearing. What about women to whom God in His inscrutable wisdom does not give this privilege of bearing children? Let them be known for their being full of good works and alms deeds as Dorcas of old. Let them visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction. Let them assist the poor and be involved in helping in God's church. Let them stand in the place of the parent in the Christian School and teach the children of God's covenant. But let them not be preachers, elders or deacons in the church. That the Scriptures do not allow.

The conclusion is obvious. Scripture is perfectly clear. The woman is not permitted to preach, rule, or minister the mercies of Christ in God's church. This is the teaching of I Timothy 2 and of I Corinthians 14. Either one believes that and walks accordingly or he rejects that. One thing is sure; one cannot argue on the basis of these passages that women are permitted to enter the offices in the church.