

Is Women's Ordination Culturally Rather Than Biblically Driven?

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Many who favor women's ordination (WO) insist that their reason for introducing the practice is that it rises as an imperative of biblical truth. Since the Bible teaches the equality of men and women, withholding ordination from women is unfair. The church should change its practice of 2,000 years because it is treating women unfairly. For two millennium the Holy Spirit has led the church through challenging theological developments, yet this change has been especially difficult to implement.

But there is another possibility: that for most of the time since Christ, this change has not been introduced because on this point the church has not been under the particular pressure of contemporary ideology.

Robert Yarbrough investigates the history of the developing ideas on these questions. He looks at a concrete example: 1 Timothy 2:9-15. Consider the content of this passage:

Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness---with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed

first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing---if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control (ESV).

Yarbrough reviewed the ATLA New Testament Abstracts index referring to theological articles which had been published concerning this passage in 1 Timothy. Especially searched were years 1956 to 1995. The findings may startle those who have assumed that viewpoints on this topic have been strictly mediated by an interest in Bible truth and that interest in ordaining women arises simply from the imperatives of Scripture.

Here is the data. Across an approximately 40 year period, ten articles supported a historic view (a position consonant with almost 2,000 years of Christian interpretation of this passage). Meanwhile, more than twice as many articles (twenty-three) argued for a "progressive" interpretation.

The year 1969 marks the beginning of the 'progressive' voice. Prior to that time, apparently, while there is no lack of rejection of Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 on other grounds, the distinctive features of 'progressive' understanding as these have taken shape in contemporary discussion had not emerged (Robert W. Yarbrough, "Progressive and Historic: The Hermeneutics of 1 Timothy 2:9-15," in Andreas J. Kostenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, 2nd ed., 2005, p. 134).

One cannot but concur with Yarbrough:

It simply strains credulity to maintain that it is mere coincidence that 'progressive' readings of 1 Timothy 2, which are at most marginally attested in church history prior to the women's movement of the 1960s and since, are not indebted to that movement in fundamental respects for their plausibility (*Ibid.*).

The Religion Index One database was also consulted, its focus being at least somewhat different. Even so, check this. Prior to 1970-74, the index cites no articles with the progressive

focus. After 1974, the number of progressive articles mushroomed to become about 40% of all cataloged published discussion. Therefore, any claim that these interpreters are addressing the text "with no fundamental indebtedness to the larger social milieu should be taken with a sizable grain of salt" (*Ibid.*, pp. 134, 135).

Yarbrough proceeds to consider two of the most important voices involved in this change of viewpoint---Krister Stendahl and F.F. Bruce.

Stendahl wrote in the last years of the 1950s. According to him, "Jesus and Paul shared the exegetical and cultural presuppositions of their time" (op. cit. in Yarbrough, p. 135). Stendahl considered that truth as understood by Paul and Jesus was not timeless and transcendent, but rather, culturally conditioned, even in their inspired minds. Yarbrough sums Stendahl's approach:

Stendahl's 'progressive' hermeneutic thus involves pitting Galatians 3:28 (and a few other Pauline phrases that he thinks hint in the same egalitarian direction) against other passages that speak of women's subordination. This includes 1 Timothy 2:9-15. What the Bible repeatedly states (classic passages include Eph. 5:22 - 6:9; Col. 3:18 - 4:1; Titus 2:2-10; 1 Pet. 2:13-21) and everywhere assumes is set aside by the hermeneutical move of declaring the Bible culturally bound when it speaks about people. Prophetic, dominical, and apostolic insight take a back seat to the presumed superior vantage point of the modern or postmodern West (*Ibid.*, p. 136).

Stendahl's view is pragmatic. He is driven by the cultural views surrounding him more than by the text, and uses higher critical presuppositions which permit him to disregard the actual statements of the text. He believes these statements to be culturally bound, presented by the Bible writers in ways that cannot transcend the culture of the writer.

F.F. Bruce collects the baton from Stendahl, running onward in the same vein. How does Bruce deal with the text?

[W]hatever in Paul's teaching promotes true freedom is of universal and permanent validity; whatever seems to impose restrictions on true freedom has regard to local and temporary conditions (F.F. Bruce op. cit. in Yarbrough, p. 138).

Thus, Bruce, as Stendahl, makes criteria from outside the Scripture his standard of truth. These two scholars bend the Word to make it fit their ideas. And yet, these are key voices who undergird those that have come after. Here are the foundations upon which Evangelical Feminists have built. While Evangelical Feminists have insisted that they accept the inspired material from Paul and Jesus, they build on the groundwork of those before them who had jettisoned Scripture as the infallible basis for truth. Can Adventists build anything enduring on such foundations?

Thomas R. Schreiner writes in another chapter in the same book. His testimony aids in summing our concerns here:

I desired to believe that there are no limitations for women in ministry and that every ministry position is open to them. As a student, I read many articles on the question, hoping that I could be exegetically convinced that all ministry offices should be opened to women. Upon reading the articles, though, I remained intellectually and exegetically unconvinced of the plausibility of the 'new' interpretations of the controversial passages. Indeed, reading the egalitarian interpretations persuaded me that the complimentarian view was true, since the former involved unlikely interpretations of the 'problem' passages. I remember saying to a friend who is a New Testament scholar, 'I would like to believe the position you hold. But it seems as if you have to leap over the evidence of the text to espouse such a position.' He replied, 'Tom, you are right. Take that leap.' Leaping over the evidence is precisely what I am unwilling to do. Thus, I remain intellectually and exegetically unconvinced that the egalitarian position is tenable (Thomas R. Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15: A Dialogue With Scholarship," in Andreas J. Kostenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds, *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, 2nd ed., 2005, p. 86).

Culture cannot be our guide. As Christians, we derive our marching orders, nay, our very view of reality, from the Scriptures. Something peculiar is going on when two thousand years of biblical teaching is suddenly overturned by scholars echoing a secular movement. How interesting that the arguments suddenly change in 1969 to favor a movement just then at fever pitch (see Larry Kirkpatrick, "Foundations of Women's Ordination, part 4: Second

Wave Feminist Theology, at <http://ordinationtruth.com/featured/kirl-fwo-pt4>, accessed 2013-08-08).

Conclusion

And so, the question, Is WO culturally rather than biblically driven? needs to be asked. The evidence, as noted above and at greater length in my "Foundations of Women's Ordination" articles, suggests that, Yes, it is. It does not necessarily follow from this that the idea is wrong or unbiblical. But it does lead us to question especially the central premise of many pro-WO Seventh-day Adventists, that the core viewpoints of alleged egalitarian thought which stand behind the movement to ordain women in our day are ultimately compatible with the teaching of the Scriptures. Secular, Radical, and Mainstream Feminists have insisted that these ideas are *not* compatible. Only Evangelical Feminists have insisted that they are.

If they are correct, we could adopt the ideas and not lose our way with the Scriptures. But if they are not, we would be letting go our anchor and casting ourselves adrift upon unsteady and tumultuous seas where many other formerly biblically serious denominational ships have already wrecked. Scripture, not culture must guide our course. This is where it is decided whether or not we shall be Adventist.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Pastor Larry Kirkpatrick has served churches in Nevada, Utah, California. They presently serve in the forest fastness of Northern Idaho where Larry lives with his wife Pamela and their children Seamus (age 7) and Mikayla (age 6).