

The Role of Women in the Church – Topics to be Discussed and Representative References

- Session 1: Introduction
- Sessions 2 & 3: The Created Order and the Role of Women in the Church (Gen. 1-3)
- Session 4: The Created Order and the Role of Women in the Church (Gal. 3:28)
- Sessions 5: The Created Order and the Role of Women in the Church (Part 1)
(I Timothy 2:8 - 15)
- Session 6: The Created Order and the Role of Women in the Church (Part 2) (I
Corinthians 11:7 – 10)
- Sessions 7: “True Womanhood” and the Work of Women in the Church (Part 1)
(Proverbs 31)
- Session 8: “True Womanhood” and the Work of Women in the Church (Part 2)
(I Timothy 5:3 – 16; Titus 2:3 – 5)
- Session 9: Jesus, the Samaritan Woman, and Breaking Cultural Barriers (Jn. 4:
1-42)
- Sessions 10: The Relationship of Husbands and Wives in Christ (Eph. 5:21-33; Col.
3: 18, 19; Pet. 3:1-7)
- Session 11: Phoebe and the Role of Women as Deaconesses in the Church (Rom.
16:1, 2; I Tim. 3:11)
- Session 12: Priscilla (Prisca) and the Role of Women as Teachers of Men (Acts
18:1-3, 18-22, 26-28; I Cor. 16:19; Romans 16:3-5; II Tim. 4:19; II
Tim. 1:1-5)
- Sessions 13: Wives, Women and Propriety in Worship (I Cor. 11:2-16)
- Session 14: Women and Silence during the Assembly. (Part 1) (I Corinthians 14:
34, 35)
- Session 15: Women and Silence During the Assembly. (Part 2) (I Timothy 2:7 –
12)
- Session 16: Summation

Representative References

These references are *not* intended to be inclusive and they are *not* necessarily recommended. They are *not* listed in any order of priority. Rather, they are provided to demonstrate the range of views on the topic of the role of women in the church.

1. Osburn, Carroll D (ed.): Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity (Volumes I and II). Joplin Missouri, College Press, 1993, 1995

The most scholarly and thorough review of the role of women in the church by members of the churches of Christ. Articles written by scholars from the Restoration movement (mostly church of Christ). Provides significant historical background and generally takes a close look at the historical context of scripture in order to render an interpretation. Addresses all the key passages. Generally balanced but more focused upon the historical context.

2. Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth: But She Said. Boston, Beacon Press, 1992

A good example of a feminist interpretation (and criticism) of the Bible. Schussler Fiorenza is a serious scholar, yet she begins with the premise that since men, for the most part, wrote the sacred scriptures, the scriptures are “suspect” from the feminist perspective. “I seek to work out a process and method for a feminist political reading that can empower women who, for whatever reasons, are still affected by the Bible they read ‘against the grain’ of its patriarchal rhetoric.” Explores key women in the scriptures, such as Miriam, Mary Magdalene and Priscilla.

3. Rowland, Robert H: “I Permit Not a Woman...” To Remain Shackled. Corona, CA, Lighthouse Publishing Company, 1991

An elder and former faculty member at Oklahoma Christian College, Robert Rowland makes an impassioned plea for us to change our views on the role of women in the church. He focuses upon what he believes to be our misreading of key passages especially on women holding offices in the church and women remaining silent in the church. “We do not practice what we claim the Bible teaches with any consistency and, most shocking, I concluded that the Bible does not really teach what we claim it does.” He focuses upon Greek words which he believes we have misused.

4. Murphy, Cullen: The Word According to Eve. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company. 1998.

Murphy, managing editor for *The Atlantic Monthly*, provides a most readable review of current feminist biblical scholars. There are a few pearls scattered through the book which can inform a study of scripture related to women’s issues. This work,

however, is of most benefit to someone who wishes to obtain an overview of feminist biblical scholarship, especially from the perspectives of the key players in the movement.

5. Smith, F. LaGard: The Cultural Church. Nashville, Tennessee, 20th Century Christian, 1992

Smith explores the new hermeneutic. He challenges the trend within churches of Christ to leave our traditional approach to the interpretation of scripture, namely command, example and necessary inference. His challenge is especially relevant regarding how we view the scriptures in the New Testament (especially the letters of Paul) in terms of their historical context. He notes that “there’s no reason to be embarrassed about our roots or threatened by our future as long as we stay the course. In the main, the call for a new hermeneutic reflects more *reaction* than *action*. My fear is that it may be more *deconstruction* than *reconstruction*.” He concludes that “taking ‘command, example, and necessary inference’ seriously would mean having to accept the well-documented biblical principle of male spiritual leadership.” (see below)

6. Beasley, M: Set Me Free. Understanding our Traditions in the Light of Grace. Houston, Diversity Press, 1999.

A book which emphasizes a more narrative and historical approach to Biblical interpretation by a lawyer and sometimes minister at a large Texas congregation. Covers a number of subjects including the role of women. He concludes that “there is sufficient evidence in Scripture and from the ministries of women in the early church to support a more active role of women in ministries, including allowing women on worship teams, distributing communion, appointing women deacons, and even leading public prayer.”

7. Lightfoot, Neil R.: The Role of Women: New Testament Perspectives. Memphis Tennessee, Student Association Press, 1978

Lightfoot is one of the more respected scholars in churches of Christ, a long time professor at Abilene Christian University. He examines four critical passages: I Corinthians 7, 11 and 14 as well as I Timothy 2. He considers their historical and literary settings and their application today. His views probably reflect closely the current role and activities of women at the Brooks Avenue congregation.

8. Allen, C. Leonard: Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church. Abilene, Tx, Abilene University Press, 1993

Allen reviews the lives and activities of persons who were active in the Restoration Movement during the 19th and early 20th century. Among these persons is Silena Moore Holman who participated in a long time debate with David Lipscomb about the role of women in the church. Also documents some interesting reflections of

Alexander Campbell who believed that women were appointed as deaconesses in the New Testament church (though he did not crusade for their appointment during the early Restoration movement).

9. MacArthur, John: God's High Calling for Women. Panorama City, CA, Word of Grace Communications, 1987.

MacArthur, a conservative minister and prolific writer examines I Timothy 2:9-15 (perhaps the most challenging passage regarding the role of women in the church). He concludes that "Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says women are to accept their God-given role. They must not seek the leadership role in the church. Primarily they are to raise godly children."

10. Craig, Darlene: A Worthy Woman. Salem, Oregon, Valor Press, 1983.

An example of a number of books written by women for women based on Proverbs 31:10-31. She focuses in particular upon the importance of the woman as mother and homemaker and in this her worth is incalculable. "Today the home must be upheld both by example and specific teaching, that our daughters not be embarrassed to happily anticipate marriage and motherhood, and our sons may look forward with genuine masculine pleasure to the prospect of loving and providing for a family." Well written and well referenced.

11. Smith, F. LeGard: Male Spiritual Leadership. (Formerly titled Men of Strength for Women of God and What Most Women Want.) Nashville, Tennessee, 21st Century Christian, 1998)

A thoughtful interpretation by a more conservative member of the churches of Christ. Smith's primary argument is that the debate over the role of women in the church derives from a lack of male spiritual leadership, a pattern which God instituted at the creation. He states, "the principle of male spiritual leadership ...has nothing to do with rules for inhibiting women and everything to do with encouraging men to be more responsible, more participatory, and more spiritual...". He concludes that the controversy over woman's role in the church will abate when the divine pattern is accepted.

12. Kroeger, RC and Kroeger, CC: I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking I Timothy 2:11 – 15 in Light of Ancient Evidence. Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1992.

The Kroeger's propose a unique interpretation of I Timothy 2:11 – 15. Specifically they suggest "that these verses are not intended as the rationale for prohibiting a gospel ministry for women, but rather they constitute a refutation of a widespread heresy...directed against Gnostic or proto-Gnostic mythology glorifying Eve." An interesting though somewhat extreme attempt to understand the passage within its historical framework.

13. Kostenberger AJ, Schreiner TR, Baldwin HS (eds.): Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of I Timothy 2:9 – 15. Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1995.

This volume is beyond most of us in terms of our ability to follow the arguments made by the authors. An in depth study of the Greek text of this most critical passage for understanding the role of women in the church. The conclusion of the authors is that Paul states that “women are prohibited from teaching or exercising authority because of the creation order...they are more prone to deception since they are more nurturing and relational than men...women are less likely to perceive the need to take a stand on doctrinal non-negotiable since they prize harmonious relationships more than men do...the church in the twentieth century has brought sex role confusion on itself by...male sins [incompetence, chauvinism].”

14. Bristow, JT: What Paul Really Said About Women. San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1988.

Bristow, a Disciples of Christ minister, writes an easily read volume (a word study) suggesting that we have misunderstood the meaning of Paul’s teachings given the implications of faulty translations of the Greek text of the New Testament. Paul was in fact revolutionary in challenging the poor status of women by the Jews, Greeks and Romans. For example, “Paul approved of women praying and prophesying during worship...these were...radical ideas to both Jew and Gentile...in practice[in Corinth] sexual equality among Christians led to a disregard for orderliness and courtesy during worship...Paul said, ‘Hush up’.”

15. Sandifer, JS: Deacons: Male and Female? A Study for Churches of Christ. Columbus, GA, Brentwood Christian Press, 1989

Sandifer, a graduate of Abilene Christian University and church of Christ minister, takes the position that many of our concepts of the appointment and work of deacons is not based on the text but on tradition. From in-depth study of the role of deacons as well as the history of the role within the Restoration Movement, Sandifer believes that there is no clear reason for excluding women from the role. Deacons were recognized for service and were under the oversight of elders (perhaps a deacon was an assistant to a particular elder). The emphasis regarding deacons in the New Testament was upon function and service and recognition of a particular office was less emphasized.

16. Commentaries

I do not recommend any specific commentary. Rather, I suggest that commentaries be used if available but that you review more than one in order to compare interpretations.

17. Word Studies

Most of us are not Greek scholars. If you are interested in pursuing the meanings of the Greek words, consider the one volume abridgment by Geoffrey Bromiley of Kittel G, Friedrich G: Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985. Unlike some of the books above, this volume does not approach the word study from the perspective of understanding a particular passage but rather from the perspective of language use in the Greco-Roman world. Almost all Greek words of theological significance are discussed.

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