

## **Session 1- Introduction - Women's Role in the Church**

“Now the Bereans were of more noble character...they...examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” Acts 17:11

### **Introduction**

- I. Objectives of the teacher.
  - A. To review the relevant passages of scripture related to the role of women in the church, both Old and New Testaments.
  - B. To study these scriptures generally within a range of two perspectives currently prevalent within churches of Christ.
    - 1. The traditional church of Christ hermeneutic of command, example and necessary inference. (Expounded by LeGard Smith and colleagues)
    - 2. The “new” or grammatico-historical hermeneutic. (Expounded by Carroll Osburn and colleagues)
  - C. To determine the overt message of the writers of the relevant scriptures.
  - D. To explore the relevant scriptures within their historical context, such as the role of women in Israel and the Greco-Roman empire.
  - E. To reflect upon these scriptures in light of current attitudes and controversies regarding the role of women in the church.
- II. Role of Class Members.

Members of the class may commit to a range of study of this topic outside the class. I would encourage each class member to, at the least, read the relevant passages of scripture carefully before each class and read one or two chapters before and after each passage (so that you develop some ideas of the context of the relevant passages). Remember that the letters of Paul were written to be read at one sitting, not a chapter a night. I would also encourage all class members to think about the questions provided the week prior to each session so that you will be prepared to carefully review these passages. Following each session, review the class notes and your own notes. Pray for understanding. Talk with others about questions or concerns which arise. Use these sessions as an incentive to engage in your own in depth study.

Some of you will wish to study this topic in greater depth. Serious attention to the relevant passages of scripture (for example, a word study and/or review of multiple commentaries) is the next appropriate step.

Many books have been written in recent years on the topic of the role of women in the church. I would strongly recommend that, if you choose to read books on the topic, you read more than one book and read authors with varying views. Do not look to a book as a guide, but rather as a stimulus to think critically about the

topic. For example, a book may lead you back to a fresh look at a passage of scripture.

III. Factors which have focused the role of women as a topic of intense discussion in churches of Christ?

This study did not arise because of current concerns at Brooks Avenue but was recognized nearly one year ago as necessary for the growth of the congregation.

A. Feminism and the “liberation” of women.

1. Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*.
2. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and “Biblical feminism.”
3. The changing role of women in American society and the hierarchical paradigm – movement of women to the workplace, singles and single parenthood.

B. The reaction to feminism.

1. Helen Andelin and *Fascinating Womanhood*.
2. F. LaGard Smith and *What Most Women Want: What Few Women Find*.
3. James Dobson and the threat to the American family.

C. The “old” and “new” hermeneutic.

1. Alexander Campbell, J.D. Thomas and “command, example and necessary inference.”
2. Carroll Osburn. Thomas Olbricht, Wineskins, and the gramatico-historical interpretation of the scripture.
3. The call for a “new hermeneutic.”

D. Recognition of “problematic” (perhaps conflicting) passages in the scriptures.

1. Uncovered heads and prophesy by women during worship. (I Corinthians 11:2-16).
2. Admonitions regarding slaves. (I Corinthians 12:13, Philemon)

E. The “third great awakening” and the emergence of a desire to move from a passive to an active engagement in worship services by both men and women (what some have called the “worship wars”).

IV. How has the role of women changed in churches of Christ over the past 50 years?

A. Typical activities today which were not typical 50 years ago.

1. Focus upon women's ministries and women speakers at seminars/lectures.
2. Active participation in discussions by women during Bible studies on Sunday mornings.
3. Increased visibility of couples as co-teachers for seminars and other presentations. E.g. Royce and Pam Money, Randy and Camilla Becton, Carl and Smitty Brechen, Norvell and Helen Young.
4. Installation of women as administrators in our Christian Colleges.
5. Appointment of women to editorial boards of Christian publications. (Helen Young as a Senior Editor for Power for Today.)
6. Admission of women as graduate students at Schools of Religion.
7. Service by women on Boards of Trustees for Christian Colleges.
8. Signing to the deaf by women while standing during worship services.
9. Teaching by women of men in Bible courses at Christian colleges (Annie May Lewis teaching at Harding Graduate School of Religion).
10. Overt articles written by women for mainline church of Christ publications (Charlotte Fanning wrote for the Gospel Advocate, signing her articles simply as "C.F." over 100 years ago.)
11. Prayers by women during gender mixed activities outside of official worship services.
12. Service by single women as fully supported independent missionaries (Sarah Andrews served as a missionary in Japan early in this century).
13. Hiring of women by congregations as children's educational directors and ministers/counselors to other women.

B. Atypical activities in churches of Christ today.

1. Women leading singing.
2. Women making announcements during official worship services.
3. Women serving as ministry leaders (other than for ministries exclusive to women).
4. Women serving at the Lord's table.
5. Women reading scripture leading prayers during official worship services.
6. Women appointed as deaconesses.

C. Rare to non-existent in churches of Christ today.

1. Women preaching.
2. Women serving as elders.

V. Why is this discussion so fearful to so many at Brooks Avenue?

- A. We fear that the church is changing its orientation to the interpretation of scripture and that what seemed clear in the past is no longer clear. We fear that we are departing from traditions which have served the restoration movement well during the sea change in Protestant Christianity over the past 150 years.

- B. We fear that we have not interpreted scripture appropriately, biased by our own traditions, and have thus shut the doors of the church to many that God has accepted.
- C. We fear that conflict will heighten between older and younger generations within our congregation, destroying an atmosphere of unity and love.
- D. We fear that, if we don't address the role of women openly, a rift will occur in the congregation.
- E. We fear secularism/humanism infiltrating the church.
- F. We fear that, if we don't change our ways, our efforts at evangelism will fail because our message will not appear relevant to the people we attempt to teach.
- G. We fear the nuclear family will be destroyed because the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives will become so confused that families will not be able to function as a unit. We fear children will find no security, no stability in our families.
- H. We fear that women will be abused in families and will not be capable of seeking help because the hierarchical structure of the family is considered more sacred than the safety of family members.
- I. We fear that, if women become more prominent in the church (matriarchy), men will abdicate their responsibilities in the church. We fear the abandonment by men of spiritual leadership in the church.
- J. We fear that, if men are dominant in the church (patriarchy), the needs and potential contributions of women will be dismissed.

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