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1-800-611-8080 / www.cgom.org
PO Box 54621, Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

Were women "seen, but not heard"

Women in the Bible

Part 2

Continuing to look at the disputed role of women in the Bible and in the Church

by Darryll Watson

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In the previous article we explored the Scripture texts which define the role of women in society. Clearly, woman was created equal in value to man (Gen. 1:27). Man, however, was inadequate by himself (Gen. 2:18). Alone of all creatures, she was created from man and for man. All others, including man, were created from "dust". Though equal, woman was created with a special role different from man.

In ancient Israel, men performed the official priestly functions, but women were not to be just appendages to the religion. We saw that they were expected to learn and keep the Torah instructions, and to teach them to their children. They served as singers and servers at the house of worship. They served as prophetesses. One (at least) was a judge. Men came to them for the word of the Lord. But women were never priests (priestesses) in God's religion. The priests represented the people to God, and God to the people. Women - probably because of their created special role - were never in that position.

Even though we find all these positive aspects about women in the Old Testament, we nevertheless find that in the time of Messiah, and later, the religious leaders (rabbis, Pharisees, priests) had relegated women to second-class citizenry. Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah, for example, expressed this sentiment: "Men come [to synagogue] to learn, women come to hear" (Mishna)!

Jesus's Regard for Women

The Messiah - Jesus Christ- restored women to their status as equal in value. In Matthew 12:49-50, in response to a statement about his relatives being outside, we read that, stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Behold my mother and my brothers. For whosoever shall do the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus makes no distinction by gender as to equality among disciples.

In John 4:7-30 is an account that is quite profound with

regard to Christ's regard for women. Here is an account in which many may focus on what appears to be a scolding. But notice that Christ actually considered this Samaritan woman capable of understanding "living water", "the proper place of worship", and the spiritual nature of God. Unless you remember the rabbinical disdain for women, and their even greater disdain for people of Samaria, this may not seem so remarkable. But consider that he took considerable time to reason with her.

Likewise, in the account of his interaction with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30, Jesus allowed himself to be persuaded by this woman to respond to her plea. These accounts show his appreciation for the intellectual and spiritual capacities of women.

Further examples of Jesus' appreciation for the faith and devotion/loyalty of women can be found in the account of the woman who had an issue of blood and sought to touch his "outer garment" in order to be healed. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well: go in peace and be healed of your afflictions" (Mark 5:25-34).

Also, the example of the woman who washed his feet with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair. He said to his host regarding this woman, "For this reason I say to you, her sins which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little.. loves little". And to the woman he said, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50).

Women's Part in Christ's Ministry

Though Christ did not tell a woman to "feed my sheep" (John 21:17), nor choose any women as apostles, they were a central and active in supporting Christ's ministry and that of the New Testament church.

We find the Messiah and his disciples accepting financial and other support from women. In Matthew 8 we find Christ healing Peter's mother-in-law. When she is healed

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she rises and “waits on” or “serves” him.

In Luke 8, we find a group of women following him and they “ministered to them out of their private means” The word for this service in the Greek is from diakoneo from which the words deacon and deaconess are derived in modern English.

Women were at the crucifixion and at the resurrection. It was the women who prepared the spices and oils to anoint the body of Christ. They are the ones who were first at the tomb. It was a woman who first saw and recognized the Saviour after his resurrection. When he was risen, Christ entrusted the announcement of his resurrection to a woman and she was instructed to, “Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead.” See Matthew 28:5-7 and John 20:1- 18.

Not surprising then, are his uses of woman in parables: the lost coin, wise and foolish bridesmaids, the unjust judge, the widow’s mite. These statements about women are full of respect and appreciation, if we can hear.

Paul and Women

Paul got the message loud and clear. In Galatians 3:28, the equality of women before God is affirmed: “...there is neither male or female.” In 1 Corinthians 11:5, we read, “But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying...“ What was this “praying”, Wall women pray in private, at home? What was this “prophesying” if women are simply relegated to insignificance? It simply does not make sense that way.

Though apparently excluded from the authoritative teaching role of pastor or elder (I Timothy 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 14:34), women are included in “fellow workers” in Romans 16:3,6,12. Phebe is called a deacon (= minister, again Greek diakoneo is the root), or servant, in Romans 16:1.

“Indeed, true comrade, I ask you also to help these women who have who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow-workers, whose names are in the book of life...” says Paul in Philipians 4:3 (NASB).

Paul supported wholly the worth of women and their equality in salvation, but realized that men and women have different roles and different challenges. Though writing that all Christians must submit one to another (Ephesians 5:2 1), he recognized that women especially are

to be subject to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18). Similarly, though all Christians are to love one another (Romans 13:8), men especially are to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25).

Is this so surprising? Doesn’t it fit with our examination of the order of creation, the role of women in Old Testament times? We have a lot of information here. Women were not doing priestly duties in the Tabernacle or Temple. Women were not representing their families to God (Deut. 16:16).

In the Old Testament women prophesied, judged (even speaking God’s Word to men). In the New Testament, women prophesied (Acts 21:9) and expounded the scriptures to men (Acts 18:26), though not always correctly (Rev. 2:20). Women are, too, encouraged to teach younger women (Titus 2:4). Men and women are to teach their children (Eph. 6:1), though men have the greater responsibility (Eph. 6:4). There is no example, however, of a woman explaining and expounding the Scriptures in sermon fashion. Not surprisingly, because it doesn’t fit the Scriptural pattern.

But what about other forms of service in the assembly? Is it appropriate for women to sing in services (hymns and even special music)? The Scriptural pattern of service in the Tabernacle and Temple encourages this.

In Bible Study and Bible discussion can women have an opinion and would it be all right for them to express themselves, to answer and ask questions? Did not women interact this way with Jesus? The Bible’s instructions are clear to men and women. Everything must be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). The questions must not be those sort of domestic trivialities that a woman could ask her husband at home (1 Corinthians 14:45). The woman (or man) must not use participation in church activities as an opportunity to usurp authority, grab control or engage in church politics (1 Tim. 2:12, 3 John 9).

Clearly, if we review the whole scope of women in the Scriptures and the history of women in the early church, we must conclude that women are not second class Christians. Far from it.

It behooves men and women to properly understand and respect the intent that God has for women. Are there differences in function? Clearly! But not “superiority” and not “inferiority! “As we strive to understand the proper uses of the functional parts of the Spiritual Body, let us never forget that truly. God loves all His children equally.

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