

New Testament Teaching on the work of Christian Women.

THIS article is designed to be a summary of New Testament teaching on the work and sphere of Christian women. It is not combative, but inductive. It is not a review of the thoughts of others, but a presentation of what the writer has learned from the Scriptures. It is an effort to show, independently of Conference Paper and of conflicting sides, what the Word of God says on the subject. What then is the position of women as taught in the New Testament? What work is woman there reported to have done? What is she encouraged to do? In what sphere did she toil? Wherein did she serve her Lord? What did she do during the ministry of the Lord and of His apostles? What is her labour in connection with the Church and the evangelisation of the world? What may she do, what ought she to do, towards the propagation of Christianity?

1. Women ministered to the Lord.—‘There were also women looking on afar off: among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; who also, when Jesus was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him; and many other women who came up with him unto Jerusalem’ (Mark 15:40-41). ‘And many women were there, beholding afar off, who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s children’ (Matt. 27:55-56). ‘And the twelve were with Jesus, and certain women, who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who ministered unto him of their substance’ (Luke 8:1-3). The facts of these verses may be summarised thus: (1) women accompanied Jesus throughout Galilee; (2) they accompanied Him from Galilee to Judea; (3) their object in accompanying Jesus was to minister

to Him; (4) the women who ministered were many; (5) their ministry consisted in supplying the temporal wants of Jesus; they provided Him from their own substance with the necessaries of life. Happy women! to have had the honour of supplying the wants of Him who though He had been rich, for our sakes had become so poor that He had not where to lay His head. The ministry of women is for ever ennobled by these brief records.

2. A woman of Samaria told her neighbours about Christ.—The woman 'went away into the city, and saith to the men, Come, see a man, who told me all things that ever I did: can this be the Christ?' 'And from that city many of the Samaritans believed on him because of the word of the woman, who testified, He told me all things that ever I did' (John 4:28-29, 39). The woman quite naturally told the men of the city of the wonderful stranger at Jacob's well, invited them to see Him for themselves, and to say whether He might not be the Messiah. Anything like a public meeting, addressed by a woman, is not in the chapter. There simply was neighbourly converse between the inhabitants of the same town. The woman, as any other woman then and since, conversed of the latest news with those whom she knew.

Have we not here a fine example of what Christian women might constantly aim at?—speak to their neighbours of the Saviour. Their own knowledge of Him, and experience of His saving power, might be often made a theme of conversation, instead of the latest novels, novelties, fashions, and passing trifles of the world. Such conversation would diffuse a heavenly influence all around.

3. Women told of the resurrection.—Matt. 18:1-10 records that two Marys were twice instructed to go tell of the resurrection. An angel said, 'Go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him.' And they 'did run to bring His disciples word.' Jesus afterward appeared to them and said, 'Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.'

Mark 16:1-11 gives another report. The white-robed young man instructed the women to go tell the disciples and Peter, that Christ was going before them into Galilee. With some additions and slight variations, it resembles Matthew's account. There is added the appearance of the Lord to Mary. And when Mary had seen the Lord, 'she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept.'

Luke reports that the women 'returned from the tomb, and told all these things to the eleven, and to all the rest.' The women named, are 'Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother James, and other women' (chap. 24:9-10). A number of women must have published the glad tidings of the resurrection of the Redeemer.

John's account contains an earlier report by Mary Magdalene. 'She runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him' (chap. 20:2). After she had seen the Saviour, John says, 'Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her' (verse 18).

There were at least three distinct reports by the women: (1) Mary's report that the body was taken away; (2) the report of a number of women of the vision of the angels; (3) Mary's report of having seen the Lord. But in no case was there a public proclamation by the women.

4. One woman, along with her husband, instructed a public speaker.—Apollos 'began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly' (Acts 18:26). Priscilla is as much credited with the improvement of the eloquent Apollos as her husband Aquila is,

5. One woman was a servant of the Church.—‘I commend unto you Phebe our sister, who is a servant of the church which is at Cencrea’ (Rom. 16:1). Servant is here a translation of *diakonos*, deacon. Phebe was a deacon, a minister, or a servant in some way, although no-one can tell what ministry or service she rendered. It needs not that that one be a public speaker to be a minister. A chapel-keeper is a minister; a visitor is a minister; in many ways women may be servants of the Church.

6. Some women were co-labourers with Paul.—He entreated a certain true yoke-fellow to help those women who laboured with him in the Gospel (Phil 4:3). We are as ignorant of the labour they performed, as we are of the ministry of Phebe. Labour in the Gospel is not restricted to speaking, and still less is it restricted to public speaking to a mixed congregation. Women might be co-labourers in a dozen ways without ever taking the platform along with men.

7. Women had the gift of prophecy.

(1) Prophecy by women was predicted (Joel 2:29). Upon the handmaids, said God, I will pour out My Spirit. Acts 2:16-21 gives the full quotation from Joel as explanatory of what happened on Pentecost. Although women no more prophesied on the day of Pentecost than the sun was darkened and the moon changed into blood, there was nevertheless the beginning of that outpouring of the Spirit which was to be for women as well as men, for all flesh, and not only for a few Jews.

(2) Philip’s four daughters prophesied (Acts 21:9). More is not said of them, but the simple declaration is a clear accomplishment of Joel’s prophecy respecting women.

(3) Anna was a prophetess, and spoke of Jesus to all them that were looking for redemption (Luke 2:36-38).

(4) Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied (Luke 1:41-45).

(5) Mary was manifestly equally inspired (Luke 1:46-55).

(6) Regulations were given by Paul to guide women while prophesying. ‘Every woman praying or prophesying with her head unveiled dishonoureth her head: for it is one and the same thing as if she were shaven’ (1 Cor. 11:5). The undoubted implication is that women were wont to prophesy. The passage, however, is silent as to where the women exercised the gift of prophecy.

What was this prophecy with which women were endowed, and respecting the exercise of which Paul gave instruction?

(a) Teaching and prophecy were different things (1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11). Prophets are second; teachers third. In Ephesians, teachers are further removed from prophets, evangelists and pastors coming between them.

(b) Prophecy springs from revelation (1 Cor. 14:29-31).

(c) Prophecy was a gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:17-18).

(d) Prophecy was one of the miraculous endowments (1 Cor. 12:10).

(e) Prophecy disclosed hidden things (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

Prophecy was a bringing to light of what ordinary, unaided mortals could not see; it was an inspiration of the Spirit, revealing something otherwise unknown.

8. Women prayed (1 Cor. 11:5-13).—These verses manifestly imply that women were in the habit of praying. But, as in prophesying, there is no indication where they prayed.

9. Women should teach.—Paul wrote to Titus that the aged women were to teach the young women (Titus 2:3-4). Teachers and scholars are both named as of one sex. Paul encouraged women to teach women, and even named some subjects of instruction.

10. Widows indeed.—1 Tim. 5:3-16 speaks of 'widows indeed' and contains special instruction respecting their support. No widow was to be chosen or taken into the number, no woman was to 'be enrolled as a widow,' unless

- (1) She was sixty years of age.
- (2) Had only been once married.
- (3) Had a good report for good deeds.
- (4) Had reared children.
- (5) Had been hospitable.
- (6) Had washed the saints' feet.
- (7) Had relieved the afflicted.
- (8) Had diligently practised every good work.

Such conditions of enrolment seem very stringent, if the enrolment was only to an obtaining of pecuniary assistance from the Church; and yet they may have been requisite to secure justice and purity, if the list was meant to include life-long pensioners on the Church's fund. That indeed is all that is distinctly taught in the passage. But the foregoing qualifications, partly resembling the qualifications of elders and New Testament ministers, deacons, or servants, make one wonder whether the widows indeed were not a kind of elderesses or female ministers. Were they appointed to do work, and be supported in it? The supposition that they were workers receiving pecuniary support, seems best to explain everything in the passage. It is a not unnatural advance on the injunction of Titus 2, that the aged women teach the young women. To Timothy there are two additional points: (1) that the aged women be recognised — a chosen, enrolled class; (2) that they be supported. But, after all, what is actually taught, that the widows indeed be enrolled and supported, should be distinguished from the hypothetical, that they constitute a special ministry or class of Church workers.

The preceding tenfold enumeration includes all that is known to me of the work of women as recorded in the New Testament. A re-examination of this classification may enable us to put it in more brief, portable form.

One thing at least of the foregoing is impossible to-day. There can be no prophesying. There is no living prophet, male nor female. No-one has now any revelation given by means of inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What Elisabeth, Mary, Anna, Philip's daughters, and women in Corinth did, is not now possible to any woman. Prophecy has ceased.

Ministering to the Lord, as previously described, is likewise an impossibility. The Lord has gone. Human eyes cannot behold Him; women's hands cannot reach Him. The nearest approach to that ministering of which I can think, is to minister to those who are carrying on His work. He who esteems as given to Himself a cup of cold water given to one of His brethren, will not overlook any service rendered to His co-labourers. It has been said that 'we have scores of clever, consecrated and amiable women in our ranks, as have also the religious communities around us, who are pining away with dyspepsia, in luxurious drawing-rooms,' etc. I am slow to believe that there are so many idle Christian women; but if things are so, it might be useful to inform such suffering loungers that there are scores of brothers honestly doing their best in the Lord's work, who would be much encouraged and improved by some womanly ministrations. Amiable women, and especially consecrated amiable women, need never suffer from dyspepsia, if activity is a cure. Public speaking would probably accelerate the disease, particularly in delicate creatures accustomed to 'luxurious drawing-rooms'; whereas a little manual ministering would have a beneficial effect in removing both bodily and spiritual dyspepsia.

A further reduction of the foregoing classification may be effected, and nothing be lost, by putting 2 and 3 under one head. They are both examples of women conversing with their acquaintances and neighbours.

The whole ten may now be put more briefly, thus :

1. Women should pray.
2. Women should teach women.
3. They can effectively converse on divine things with their acquaintances and neighbours.
4. Wives, along with their husbands, may often be useful in instructing public speakers.
5. They can minister to the comfort of other servants of the Lord in dozens of ways that only woman's ingenuity can devise.
6. And in such ways they are co-labourers in the Gospel, and servants of the Churches.
7. The widows indeed might be specially useful as ministers for the Churches.

And now having classified thus what is said that woman did and should do, let us next observe the boundaries of the field to be occupied by her. Her sphere of labour is limited by express

Scripture Restrictions

1. Silence in the Church is enjoined. 1 Cor. 14:34-35 is so explicit that women should not speak in the Churches, that it is difficult to imagine a more clearly expressed prohibition. (1) There is the simplicity of the words employed—'keep silence,' 'not permitted to speak.' (2) There is reiteration : let them keep silence ; it is not permitted them to speak ; it is a shame for them to speak. (3) There is a marked difference between the directions to the prophets and to the women. The prophets might speak two or three ; all indeed might prophesy ; but the women were not to speak. Absolute silence on their part, as respects any communication to the Church, is commanded. Wherever the Church, as such, is assembled, there must the women be silent, if they will be obedient.

The silence of woman in the Church, as commanded in the fourteenth chapter, equally restricts the prophesying by woman mentioned in the eleventh chapter. The prophets were encouraged to speak ; the women were forbidden to speak. They could not prophesy and yet keep silence in the same place. They could keep silence in the Church and prophesy elsewhere, just as they were to ask no questions in the Church, but make inquiry at home. Silence and prophecy are incompatible ; silence in the Church was enforced ; therefore prophecy by women did not take place in the Church. The verses in 1 Cor. 11, which speak of women praying and prophesying, do not speak of doing so in the Church. Scores of persons may pray and speak who never either pray or speak in the Church. There was a sphere for woman praying and prophesying, as there is still a proper sphere for her praying and teaching ; but it is not in the Church.

Teaching men is prohibited. 1 Tim. 2:11-15, like 1 Cor. 14, contains clearly couched limitations. (1) A woman has to learn in silence. (2) She is to do so with all subjection. (3) She is not to teach man. (4) She is not to have dominion over him. (5) Arguing between woman and man is even precluded ; 'but to be in silence,' being presented as the course to be adopted instead of teaching and dominating.

Woman and man are put in contrast throughout the verses ; each has clearly defined duty. Man speaks, woman is silent ; man teaches, woman learns ; man rules, woman is in subjection ; and the subjection is silent and complete.

This teachable, silent, and submissive position of woman Paul accounts for by her action in introducing sin into the world. Woman was first in sin ; she is on that account not permitted to be first under Christianity. She

was deceived by the tempter, man was not; she must not therefore, under Christ, be so placed as again to be duped, and at the same time lead man astray.

While 1 Cor. 14 prohibits woman speaking in the Church, 1 Tim. 2 forbids her teaching man, and enjoins silent learning. Silence in the Church, preclusion from teaching man, and quiet learning, together entirely debar her from addressing promiscuous audiences. There is not left a single vestige of warrant for her speaking at all in any public meeting where man is.

Is it possible that there exists a single Christian woman who, after such plain teaching is pointed out as given by Paul, ever will seek to speak in the Church, or teach in any meeting where men are? If so, I fear there is something far worse the matter with her than dyspepsia. Personally, I have no fear about our sisters generally. They are wishful to know the truth, and to abide by it. The exception to that among our sisters is so rare that we might pass it without notice, were it not that it is disobedience of Scripture precept.

3. Woman is not permitted the liberty in prayer that man has. 1 Tim. 2:8-11 expresses Paul's desires that the men pray everywhere, that the women have seemly dress and seemly behaviour, and that they be silent, etc. It is not said in so many words that the women are not to pray everywhere, but that is the natural implication. Why say that the men should pray everywhere, and that the women should do something else, unless that there was a difference between man and woman in this matter? It is legitimately involved that there are places where women may not pray. What places are they? Scripture does not say, hence we can only infer. I reason on it thus. There is no example of a woman ever praying in the Church, or in any public meeting where men were; and as there are places where men may pray and women may not, it is natural to think of those places where the men have leave to speak and the women have not. In the Church, and where men are present in public meeting, women should not teach, nor ask questions, nor speak; in the same meetings, I judge, they should not pray. Wherever they may teach or speak, there let them pray. Thus acting, we are on certain Scripture ground. Laying either the prayer meeting, or any Church meeting, open to the sisters praying, is without precept, without example, and without any Scripture naturally supporting it. If I were a sister, I would therefore never pray in the presence of men.

I am not overlooking what is said in 1 Cor. 11 of woman praying. But, as already pointed out in connection with prophesying, the praying is not said to have been in the Church; nor is there anything implying that women ever prayed where men were. The instruction about covering their heads no more implies the presence of men than the instruction to men to uncover their heads implies the presence of women. Men in prayer uncover their heads, although no woman be present; women in prayer should have their heads covered, though no man be there. The presence or absence of the other sex does not interfere with the regulations to either sex.

Some things not found in our induction of what is said of woman in the New Testament may now be named.

1. A woman apostle. The twelve apostles chosen by Christ were men, and we do not read of a woman among the seventy.

2. A woman evangelist. All the evangelists named were men.

3. A woman pastor. The pastors were to be husbands and fathers, not wives and mothers.

4. A New Testament writer from the women. The writers of the New Testament were all men.

5. A woman addressing a public meeting composed partly of men.

6. A woman praying when men were present.

Is it not passing strange that women were thus invariably omitted, if they were designed to do such work, and act as men? On the supposition that woman's sphere is different from that of man, all is plain.

In conclusion, I am wishful to make an appeal on behalf of the sisters. I have long felt that we fail to do them justice, and that our lack of suitable arrangements for them deprives the Churches of a potent agency for good. If that be so, ought we not forthwith to remedy the defect? In some instances we might arrange for sisters' meetings, where they might pray, read the Scriptures, and speak to one another thereon. In other instances we might only require to make it possible that the sisters make their own arrangements for their meetings. In addition to sisters teaching sisters, might there not be women's evangelistic meetings? Meetings conducted solely by women, and with only women present, would be on New Testament lines. Systematic visitation of women by women, both within Church membership and beyond it, is equally desirable. And 'widows indeed' could be employed in such useful service as visiting and conducting women's meetings. The value of such service would be incalculable. Women would then find openings for every desirable aspiration to serve their Lord, work would be overtaken that man cannot do, and the wild extreme of pushing some women into the place of men would be eschewed. While we take an unflinching stand against women being made men, let us be correspondingly thoughtful and watchful to employ women in every service sanctioned by Scripture; to make them, within their own sphere, co-labourers in the Gospel, and ministers in the Lord's work.

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