

Practical Questions about and Biblical Support for Women in the Church's Ministry

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Introduction

One question with which many (Baptist) congregations and search committees grapple is whether or not they should prayerfully consider calling women to serve on the ministerial staff of their churches. If and when they answer this query affirmatively, other considerations immediately follow. If our assembly were to call a woman, in what capacity might she serve? Could she be thought of and referred to as a minister or pastor and not only as a director? Would it be acceptable for her to minister to youth as well as to children and to men as well as to women? What about her offering prayers and sermons in worship services week in and week out? Might a woman serve our congregation as an Associate Pastor or Pastor? Should we license and/or ordain her? Is it appropriate for women ministers to dedicate babies and to perform wedding and funeral ceremonies? Are they to administer believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper?

Given that Baptist churches have typically embraced a congregational polity and have usually emphasized the autonomy of the local assembly, in theory a Baptist church could call whomever it wished to serve on its ministerial staff in whatever capacity. What is true in theory, however, is often less than true in practice. Theoretically, any number of Baptist search committees might well be willing to contemplate calling a woman minister to serve on their church staff; practically, many congregations feel they are unable or find themselves unwilling to extend such a call. All too frequently, however, it seems that pragmatic concerns trump principled convictions.

While disappointing, particularly for women in Baptist life who sense a call to ministry, this is not altogether surprising. Indeed, it often requires deep-seated belief and uncommon courage to call into question time-honored biblical interpretations, church traditions, and cultural conventions regarding women's roles in the church's ministry. To be fair, there are some believers who have carefully and prayerfully thought through this issue who are unable to see their way clear to affirm women as ministers or pastors. Their conceptions of God as well as of men (husbands) and women (wives), which have been shaped by both Scripture and culture, preclude them from doing so. Taken together, these are Christian people of good will who desire to be faithful to the Lord and the Bible. They should not be vilified or demonized; they are, after all, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Fellow believers, however, can respectfully disagree. Unity, not uniformity, in Christ is the goal. In the event that you are a person who is willing to consider (again) what Scripture has to say regarding women and ministry, then please keep reading. (If not, then you might want to begin praying for a willingness to read and reflect [afresh] upon all the biblical evidence.) This short essay is an attempt on the part of a life-long Baptist, who has earned a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies, has taught at three different Baptist universities, and has served Baptist churches in almost every capacity (from janitor to music minister to youth minister to pastor), to examine the most pertinent biblical materials regarding women and ministry for those (Baptists) who want and/or need guidance from Scripture on this pressing issue.

Biblical Considerations

When probing what the Scriptures say about our topic, one might want to begin by noting women in the Old Testament who assumed various spiritual roles and responsibilities. In addition to the fact that two books of the Hebrew Bible bear the names of women (Ruth and Esther), the Old Testament Scriptures refer to three women as prophetesses, namely, Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). Additionally, the Old Testament indicates that there were women who were privy to angelic appearances (e.g. Genesis 16:7; Judges 13:3-5, 9), that women could take a Nazirite vow and offer sacrifices pertaining to it (Numbers 6:1-21), that women could minister at the entrance of the tent of meeting (1 Samuel 2:22), and that women could participate in Temple music and processions (see Psalm 68:25; Ezra 2:65; Nehemiah 7:67; 1 Chronicles 25:5-7). This is not to suggest, however, that women known to us through the Old Testament were free from subjugation, discrimination, and even dehumanization at the hands of men. Having said that, such a turn of events was a far cry from the divine design where humanity, both male and female, was created by and for God (Genesis 1:27-31).

One of Israel's seers envisioned a time when the Spirit of the Lord would be poured out on all people, irrespective of gender and class (Joel 2:28-29). Acts correlates Joel's prophetic vision of the Day of the Lord with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21). In doing so, Acts indicates that the time had come for men and women, slave and free to proclaim the Lord's salvation brought about through Jesus Christ (cf. Galatians 3:28). The seismic spiritual repercussions of both the Fall and Babel were being undone in one fell swoop. Moreover, Acts draws attention to a number of

women followers of Jesus who engaged in speaking and serving ministries (Tabitha/Dorcas [9:36]; Lydia [16:14-15, 40]; Priscilla [18:26]; Philip's four prophesying daughters [21:9]). This is also the case in the Gospel of Luke, referred to in Acts 1:1 as "the first book." Throughout his Gospel, Luke highlights the importance and involvement of various women in Jesus' life and mission. He gives special attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus (1:26-56; 2:1-52; cf. John 2:1-12); Anna, the prophet (2:36-38); a circle of women who supported and served alongside Jesus and the Twelve (8:1-3; 24:49, 55; 24:10); and Mary, the sister of Martha (10:38-42).

Several women also feature in the work and ministry of the Apostle Paul. In addition to Lydia and Prisca/Priscilla (cf. Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19), mentioned in Acts and noted above, there was Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae (a port city located near Corinth), a benefactor of Paul's, and likely the courier and perhaps the first public interpreter of Paul's Letter to the Romans (Romans 16:1-2); Junia, "prominent among the apostles," seemingly as an apostle (Romans 16:7); Tryphaena and Tryphosa, women laborers in the Lord (Romans 16:12); Chloe, an influential supporter of the Apostle (1 Corinthians 1:11); Euodia and Syntyche, co-workers of Paul's who may have served the church in Philippi as overseers and deacons (Philippians 1:1; 4:2-3); Nympha, the host and leader (?) of a church in her home (Colossians 4:15); Lois and Eunice, the believing mother and grandmother respectively of Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5); and also Apphia, whom Paul depicts as a "sister," arguably meaning fellow minister (Philemon 2).

It is hard not to be impressed by the number of women involved and the variety of significant and strategic roles they played in the ministries of Jesus, Paul, and the early

church. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, to encounter New Testament texts that restrict the participation of women/wives in worship (see 1 Corinthians 14:33-36; 1 Timothy 2:8-15) and enjoin wives to submit to their husbands (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:22; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1-6). Such restrictive passages are all the more arresting in light of the fact that there are other places in the New Testament where women are instructed how they should go about praying and prophesying in worship (1 Corinthians 11:2-16) and where it is asserted that there is a mutuality, if not equality, between women/wives and men/husbands (note particularly 1 Corinthians 7:3-4; 11:11-12; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5:21).

What are we to make of these seemingly discordant biblical chords? First of all, it is both honest and prudent to acknowledge that Scriptures relevant to our topic are not easily reconciled. As a result, devout and earnest people may well arrive at different conclusions when reading and reflecting upon the same passages. Secondly, it should be noted that our questions and concerns regarding women in ministry are not explicitly or systematically addressed in Scripture. Therefore, when people maintain that the Bible is crystal clear on this matter or that clearer texts are to interpret unclear texts on this issue, you have every good reason to take such assertions with a grain of salt. Sound bites and shibboleths serve us poorly, especially on this subject. Thirdly, then, we are wise to realize that issues arising in first century “Christianity” are not identical with or wholly analogous to that which concerns contemporary believers living at the dawn of the twenty-first century. To recognize and to name socio-cultural, political, and ecclesial differences and disparities between the biblical world and the (post-)modern one enables

us both to honor Scripture and to ponder how we might best appropriate its timeless truths in our times.

Where Might We Go from Here?

For my part, I find no clear or compelling biblical grounds to preclude and ample scriptural materials to support women's full and free participation in the church's ministry as God might gift and guide. That is to say, I regard those scriptural passages that silence and subordinate women in the church to be situation specific. Taken together, I find the sweep of Scripture to affirm women and to allow for their unlimited involvement in kingdom matters. Moreover, I think that the trajectory of the New Testament witness is one that encourages men and women in Christ to share and serve in gospel proclamation and church administration.

If you are inclined to agree, then I invite you to consider with me how we might help our (Baptist) churches and committees move beyond whatever hinders our affirming and employing women in (Baptist church) ministry. In a word, we should think globally and act locally. Initially, we need to assist in lovingly and skillfully raising congregational awareness to the prospects and possibilities of women ministers and to persist respectfully and patiently with those brothers and sisters who might be inclined to resist or reject such a proposal out of hand. As it happens, it is the start that stops most of us most of the time.

Additionally, we should acknowledge that it is easier to support women in ministry in theory than it is in practice. If we would assist in general, then we will have to become intentional in the particulars. Church culture and conduct tends to change slowly.

One tangible way that we can affirm women in ministry and can advance this worthy cause and concern, if incrementally, is to recommend and to support women's service and leadership in classes as well as on committees and boards (including, where applicable, the trustees, deaconate, and ushers) of local churches. Then, as ministerial positions come open perhaps churches will be more open to talk to women candidates and to confer with other congregations who have had women serving on their ministerial staffs. (Women serving and leading in [Baptist] churches is, of course, not new. The biblically-based proposal that women are called, gifted, and able to occupy formal ministerial roles and responsibilities in our congregations, however, has only recently begun to gain any real momentum.)

In due course, such a course of action might go some way in rectifying the disparity and inequity that characterizes so many of our assemblies. At such a time, we will be able to celebrate more fully and fittingly the unity in diversity that should mark our Christological, eschatological communities (note 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). As a new creation of sisters and brothers, we will then be able "with one voice [to] glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:6).