Why Arguments Against Women in Ministry Aren't Biblical

Ben Witherington III is Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary (Wilmore, Kentucky) and an ordained pastor in the United Methodist Church.

Originally published as: "Why Arguments Against Women in Ministry Aren't Biblical," *The Bible and Culture* (Patheos), June 2, 2015. https://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2015/06/02/why-arguments-against-women-in-ministry-arent-biblical/

(This is a re-post of a piece I wrote for Beliefnet many years ago, back by popular demand. BW3)

Most of you who know me, know that I did my doctoral thesis on women in the NT with C.K. Barrett at the University of Durham in England. My first three published scholarly books were on this very subject. One of the reasons I did that thirty some years ago was because of the controversy that raged then over the issue of women in ministry, and more particularly women as pulpit ministers and senior pastors. Never mind that the Bible does not have categories like 'senior pastor' or 'pulpit minister', the NT has been used over and over again to justify the suppression of women in ministry— and as I was to discover through years of research and study, without Biblical justification. Now of course equally sincere Christians may disagree on this matter, but the disagreements should be on the basis of sound exegesis of Biblical texts, not emotions, rhetoric, mere church polity, dubious hermeneutics and the like.

So in this post I am going to deal with the usual objections to women in ministry, one by one. Some of these objections come out of a high church tradition, some tend to come from low church traditions, some are Catholic/Orthodox some are Protestant, but we will take on a sampling of them all without trying to be exhaustive or exhausting.

1) Women can't be ministers, because only males can be priests offering the sacrifice of the Mass etc.

The root problem with this argument is that the NT is perfectly clear that apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, elders, deacons ARE NOT PRIESTS IN THE NT. There is no need for a separate order of priests in the NT because Christ's sacrifice made obsolete the entire OT sacerdotal system of priests, temples and sacrifices. The only priesthoods we hear about in the NT are: 1) the priesthood of all believers, which of course includes women, and 2) the heavenly high priesthood of Christ (see Hebrews). There is no new priesthood between these two carried over from the OT or inaugurated in the NT era. Indeed the whole language of sacrifice and temple is spiritualized in the NT to refer to our offering of ourselves or our praise to God, and the Temple is described in various places in the NT (cf. 1 Cor. 3-6), as either the believer's body, or the whole community of Christ in which Christ and the Spirit dwell. The problem here is essentially a hermeneutical one. Somewhere along the way about the time when the church became a licit religion under Constantine the OT hermeneutic took over, a hermeneutic which saw churches as temples, the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice, ministers as priests, the Lord's Day as the sabbath, and so on. This did a grave dis-service to the newness of the new covenant and its facets and features, and the net result was an exclusion of women from various ministries, on grounds the writers of the NT would have rejected outright.

2) Women can't be ministers because then they would have headship over men, including their husbands— and this will never do, and is a violation of the household codes in the NT.

This argument is often complex and at the heart of it is an essential confusion of what the NT says about order in the physical family and home, and order in the family of faith, wherever it may meet. It is certainly true that texts like Col.3-4 and Ephes. 5-6 and other texts in 1 Pet. for example do talk about the structure of the physical family. As I have argued at length, the patriarchal family was the existing reality in the NT world, and what you discover when you compare what is in the NT and what is outside the NT, is that Paul and others are working hard to change the existing structures in a more Christian direction. Paul, for example, has to start with his audience where they are, and then persuade them to change. And you can see this process at work in Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians. For example, though the language of headship and submission is certainly used in these texts the trajectory of the argument is intended to: 1) place more and more strictures on the head of the household to limit his power and the way he relates to his wife, his children and his slaves; 2) make the head of the household aware that women, children and slaves are in fact persons created in God's image, not chattel or property. This becomes especially clear in Philemon when Paul urges Philemon to manumit Onesimus on the basis of the fact that he is "no longer a slave, but rather a brother in Christ". Paul is working to place the leaven of the Gospel into pre-existing relationships and change them. Similarly with the roles of husbands and wives, in Ephes. 5.21ff. Paul calls all Christians to mutual submission to each other, one form of which is wives to husbands, and then the exhortation 'husbands love your wives as Christ did the church, giving himself….' can be seen for what it is— a form of self-sacrificial submission and service. Submission is no longer gender specific or unilateral as Paul offers third order moral discourse here, working for change (see my commentary on Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon– Eerdmans). Furthermore, we need to keep steadily in mind that what determines or should determine the leadership structures in the church is not gender but rather gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. The family of faith is not identical with the physical family, and gender is no determinant of roles in it. Gender of course does affect some roles in the Christian family, but that is irrelevant when it comes to the discussion of the leadership structure of the church. This is why we should not be surprised to find even in Paul's letters examples of women teachers, evangelist, prophetesses, deacons, and apostles. Paul is not one who is interested in baptizing the existing fallen patriarchal order and calling it good. One of the tell tale signs of Paul's views on such matters can be seen in what he says about baptism— it is not a gender specific sign that we have for the new covenant unlike the one for the old covenant, and Paul adds that in Christ there is no 'male and female' just as there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free. The implications of this are enormous. The change in the covenant sign signals the change in the nature of the covenant when it comes to men and women.

3) Women can't be Christian ministers because specific passages in the NT prohibit it.

Here, especially for very conservative Protestants is the nub of the matter. It is believed that 1 Cor. 14.33b-36 and 1 Tim. 2.8-15 prohibit women from teaching and preaching in the church. I will not bring up the hypocrisy of some of these arguments that make nice distinctions like— "its o.k. for women to teach or lead a Bible study in the home, but not in the church building.' (this word just in– there were no church buildings in the NT era, they met in homes!), or even worse 'its o.k. for women to teach and preach on the mission field where it's necessary, but not here in America where it isn't.' Again the logic here is completely bogus and not based on anything in Scripture at all. But what about those texts?

1 Cor. 14.33b-36 (assuming that it is an original part of this letter, which many scholars doubt on textual grounds. I disagree with the doubters) is part of a large problem solving letter. Paul is correcting problems as they arise in the house churches in Corinth. One such problem is caused by some women, apparently just some wives, who are interrupting the time of prophesying by asking questions. Now Paul has already said in 1 Cor. 11 that women are allowed to pray and prophesy in Christian worship if they wear headcoverings to hide their 'glory' (i.e. hair), since only God's glory should be visible in worship, and he is not reneging on that permission in 1 Cor. 14.33b-36. The largely Gentile congregation in Corinth brought with them into the church their pre-existing assumptions about prophecy and what was appropriate when approaching a prophet or prophetess. The oracle at nearby Delphi for example was a consultative prophetess. People would go to her to ask questions like— Should I marry this man, or Should I buy this land etc. and the oracle would give an answer. Thus it was natural for some Corinthians to think that when prophets spoke in their assemblies, they had a right to ask them questions. Paul's response is no— "worship time is not Q+A time, and you are interrupting the prophets. If you have questions asks your man (probably husband) at home. There is a time and place for such questions, but Christian worship isn't it. The reason Paul corrects women/wives in this case is not because they are women but *because they are in this instance causing this problem*, of course. A couple of other points about this text need to be noted: 1) the text says nothing about women submitting to men. The call here is for these women to be silent and in submission as even the Law says. O.K. where in the OT is there a commandment for women to be silent and submit to men? Answer NOWHERE. Its not in the Pentateuch at all, or for that matter elsewhere. What Paul is talking about is being silent in the presence of God and listening to his inspired words, in this case coming from the prophets and prophetesses! "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence (and listen)"… and be in submission to God's teaching.

What about 1 Tim. 2.8-15? This is sometimes, wrongly, seen as the ultimate proof that women should not be ministers. But again this ignores the context and nuances of the text, which of course is the major problem with proof-texting anyway. Paul here is giving Timothy some instructions about how to handle his fledgling new converts probably in Ephesus (see my commentary on the Pastoral Epistles– Letters and Homilies for Gentile Christians Vol. One IVP). Now the problem as it surfaces in 1 Tim. 2.8-15 clearly has to do with particular women, high status women who have fancy clothes and hairstyles and are expecting right off the bat to be teachers of one and all in the church. The proof that this is once more a corrective passage, dealing with problems is seen from the outset— First Paul corrects grumbling men whom he wants to pray, then he corrects these high status women. Paul is an equal opportunity corrector of men and women when they are in error. In regard to his correction of women, something needs to be said about high status women in cities like Ephesus. What we know about such women is that they played vital roles in the Greco-Roman religious festivals, temples, worship services. They were priestesses, they were prophetesses, they were teachers, healers, keepers of the eternal flame, etc. It is then not surprising that such high status women would expect to be able, once they converted to Christ, to do the same sorts of things in the church. The problem was, they needed to be properly instructed and learn before they began to instruct others, whether male or female. This is a good principle for all of us to follow. I once had a student who was getting frustrated in a seminary class because of all that he was required to learn, much of which he thought was unnecessary, and he came up to me and said— "I don't know why I need to learn all this stuff first. Why I can just get up in the pulpit and the Spirit will give me utterance." I replied– "Yes Charlie, you can do that, but its a pity you aren't giving the Holy Spirit more to work with!" Beware of using the Holy Spirit as a labor saving

device. In essence, Paul is saying the same thing to these women in Ephesus— they need to learn before they teach.

Here are some details about the exegesis of 1 Tim. 2.8-15. Once again nothing is said about women submitting to men here. The Greek is clear enough. Here the word for 'quietness' is used rather than the word for silence which we find in 1 Cor. 14, and once again the issue is their being in submission to the authoritative teaching of Timothy and others. Secondly the Greek verb "I am not now permitting" as Phil Payne has shown over and over again, is not a verb that implies an infinite extension of this refusal to permit. It means what it says "I am not presently permitting…" Why not? Because the women needed to learn before they taught. Thirdly, the Greek, since we are dealing with a text where a correction of behavior is being offered should be translated as follows "I am not currently permitting women (in this case the women referred to with the hairdos and bling and expensive attire) to teach or usurp authority over the (authorized) men. This is a prohibition of an abuse of a privilege, It does not rule out the possibility of a later authorization of a proper use of the privilege of offering Christian teaching, indeed we hear elsewhere in the Pastorals about more mature Christian women doing some teaching. The verb authenteo here is a rare one, meaning either to exercise authority, or to usurp authority, and it occurs only here in the NT. Here is a good example of why you can't study the language of the Bible in isolation from its larger context, in this case the context of usage elsewhere in Greek. Elsewhere, in a corrective context the verb refers to an abuse of power, a usurping of some role or function that others have. It does here as well.

Finally, what about the argument from creation, from the story of Eve? Paul is assuming some in his audience know the story very well. The story is as follows in the Hebrew— only Adam is instructed about the prohibition in regard to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and it was his duty to properly instruct Eve, as she was not around when that prohibition was given. As the story develops, it is clear enough that Eve had not been properly instructed. She talks about not touching the fruit of the tree, which was not part of the original prohibition. Now the very verb 'deceived' here is an important one, mainly used in Paul in connection with Eve and the Fall. A person who is not properly instructed, is easily deceived, and may take action that is disastrous. Such was the case with Eve. She is the perfect example to give to the high status women in Ephesus– they needed to properly be instructed before they took any action. I would remind you as well that on a literal reading of the Genesis story, Adam was right there with Eve on this occasion and could have and should have stopped her from picking the fruit, but he did not do so. Eve plucked the fruit, and Adam dropped the ball as the authoritative teacher for the occasion. This is no doubt why it is Adam who is blamed for the Fall in Rom. 5.12-21. Paul then goes on to offer an alternative— "but now women shall be saved by the child-bearing" or possibly it reads "women shall be kept safe through the child-bearing". What Paul is certainly not doing here is talking about salvation for women by baby-making!! So either of the two renderings I suggested are possible. I tend to favor the interpretation that the definite article before childbearing points to a specific birth— Jesus' by means of Mary. So Mary is Eve in reverse. She obeys the voice of the angel, is the handmaiden of the Lord, unlike Eve. The other possibility is that Paul is saying that the curse on women (pain and danger in child-bearing) can be reversed in Christ if they remain faithful Christians and trust the Lord. In either case, this text is not a prohibition of all women in all times in all situations preaching and teaching. It is a very specific prohibition, and doubtless Paul would say the same thing to women or men today who try to teach or preach the Word of God without properly learning it first!! One more thing about the Genesis story. The author tells us that the effects of the Fall is patriarchy. It was not God original creation order design. The text tells us that part of the original curse (not the

original blessing) on Eve will be “your desire will be for your husband, and he will lord it over you!!” So to love and to cherish degenerates into to desire and dominate!!! This is the effect of sin on the relationship, not inherent gender properties or qualities of the relationship.

One more thing, since we are talking about those texts in the Pastoral Epistles. Sometimes you hear the argument that since it is assumed in 1 Timothy that the elders will be men who are faithful to their one and only wives, that this must signal that only men should be elders in churches. This is totally forgetting that Paul is speaking as a missionary into a strongly patriarchal cultural setting whether in Ephesus or on Crete, and his principle is to start where the people already are, not where he would like them to be. This means starting with the existing male leadership structure in the culture until the leaven of the Gospel can fully do its work and change things from the inside out. So quite naturally, it is men that Timothy and Titus are going to appoint first as leaders to these brand new church plants. This does not mean it needs always and forever to be that way, but the new converts would have to be convinced by loving persuasion that it was o.k. for women to fill such roles. You can see however how Paul is already beginning to push in that direction because in Rom. 16 he mentions a woman leader named Phoebe who is a deacon in the Corinthian churches, and probably there is a reference to women deacons in the Pastoral Epistles discussions about elders and deacons as well. As I said before, you have to not just evaluate what Paul says, but read it in its cultural context, and ask what sort of changes is Paul trying to make in relationships as he applies the Gospel to the situation?

As I have learned over many years…. the problem in the church is not strong and gifted women. We need all those we can get, and were it not for them, many churches would have closed long ago. I remember so vividly meeting the babooshkas– the grandmothers in the Moscow Baptist Church, who had stopped Stalin from closing the church by standing in the door and not letting his troops enter and close it down. Thank God for strong, gifted women in the church. No, the problem in the church is not strong women, but rather weak men who feel threatened by strong women, and have tried various means, even by dubious exegesis to prohibit them from exercising their gifts and graces in the church.

If you want more along these lines, see my commentaries or my lay person’s summary *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, (Cambridge Press). Enough said.