

A few excerpts from  
"A Historical Perspective on Women's Roles"  
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*Throughout the centuries since Paul told the church in Corinth that "it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church" (2 Cor. 14:35), Christians have struggled to understand how to be faithful to Scriptural teachings like that one. This seminar offers a survey of their attempts.*

### **1. The World into which the Gospel came**

Women occupied vulnerable territory within Judaism. They had little access to property or inheritance, except through a male relative. Any money a woman earned belonged to her husband. Men could legally divorce a woman for almost any reason, simply by handing her a writ of divorce. A woman, however, could not divorce her husband.

It was into that world that Jesus came. And it was clear that he was not just another Jewish man when it came to how he viewed women.

Dorothy Sayers puts it this way: "Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us," or "The Ladies, God bless them." Who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious." Quoted in Tucker & Liefeld, 48

The myriad ways that Jesus challenged the cultural norms of his day have been widely recognized. But none of those challenges shed light on how the church functioned after his departure.

### **2. The Practice of the New Testament Church**

If we want to explore the roles that women have had across the history of the church, the obvious place to begin is in the New Testament. But while we find many references to women, it's not easy to tell what roles they had in the church.

See Romans 16

Part of the challenge of understanding the New Testament accounts is that church leadership structures as we know them didn't exist. The late I. Howard Marshall, a Scottish scholar of the New Testament, notes that the modern concept of the minister in the sense of one person ordained by the laying on of hands to be usually the chief functionary in the local church and usually the one person authorized to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper has no single counterpart in the New Testament.

That just means that when we talk about leadership roles in the New Testament church, we must remember that the early church may not have been organized in the ways we take for granted. That complicates the discussion.

### **3. The Voices of the Church Fathers**

What's much clearer is what church leaders were saying about women a century or two later. Not just about women in the church, but about women generally. And it's not pretty.

From John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople in the late fourth century. “Man is skilled at the greater things . . . but he is downright inept and useless in the performance of the less important ones so that the woman's service is necessary. God maintained the order of each sex by dividing the business of human life into two parts and assigned the more necessary and beneficial aspects to the man and the less important inferior matters to the woman.”

Or this, from Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, counted among the greatest theologians of the patristic period. “Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one.”

#### **4. Medieval Catholic theology and practice**

Though the monastic movements opened up new possibilities for women, the tone of what the church was saying in the Middle Ages didn't change much. If anything, it got worse.

Albert the Great, described by some scholars as the greatest German philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages, described women this way. “Woman is a misbegotten man and has a faulty and defective nature in comparison to his. Therefore she is unsure in herself. What she cannot get, she seeks to obtain through lying and diabolical deceptions. And so, to put it briefly, one must be on one's guard with every woman, as if she were a poisonous snake and the horned devil. . . . Thus in evil and perverse doings woman is cleverer, that is, slyer, than man. Her feelings drive woman toward every evil, just as reason impels man toward all good.” *Quaestiones super de animalibus* XV q. 11

Thomas Aquinas, arguably the most prominent of all the medieval theologians, did a considerable amount of writing on the subject of women, invariably in a derogatory manner. Aquinas argued that a woman is dominated by her sexual appetite whereas a man is ruled by reason. And a woman is dependent on the man for everything in life whereas he depends on her for procreation only. Because of her subjection woman is not fit for ordination, Aquinas argued. Tucker & Liefeld, 164

#### **5. The Reformation – Luther, Calvin, Anabaptists**

As the Reformation unfolded in the solidly patriarchal world of the 16th century, it became clear that its leading lights were as much a product of their era as their Catholic predecessors had been.

Luther, who had a penchant for saying outrageous things on a wide variety of topics--some of them doubtlessly under the influence of that German beer of which he was so fond--didn't use restraint when it came to sharing his views on women either.

“No gown worse becomes a woman than the desire to be wise.”

“Take women from their housewifery,” he quipped, “and they are good for nothing.”

What about the Anabaptists? Though some historians argue that women participated more freely in Anabaptist circles than elsewhere in the Reformation, others argue that their actual status turned out to be little different from that of their sisters in the territorial churches.

Menno Simons' advice to women sounds traditional enough: “remain within your houses and gates unless you have something of importance to regulate such as to make purchases, to provide in temporal needs, to hear the word of the Lord, or to receive the holy sacraments, etc. Attend faithfully to your charge, to your children, house and family.”

## **6. After the Reformation: The Great Awakenings, the Wesleyan revival and beyond**

Perhaps the first hint of climate change with regard to how women participated in church life came in the 1600's among Quakers, or the Society of Friends. George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, strongly defended the full involvement of women in ministry.

By a century later, other voices would also question the historic practices of the church. In 1770 John Wesley defended the practice of women preaching this way: "I think the strength of the cause rests there—on your having an extraordinary call. So, I am persuaded, has every one of our lay preachers. The whole work of God called Methodism is an extraordinary dispensation of his Providence. Therefore I do not wonder if several things occur therein which do not fall under the ordinary rules of discipline. St Paul's ordinary rule was "I permit not a woman to speak in the congregation." Yet in extraordinary cases he made a few exceptions; at Corinth in particular. Tucker & Liefeld, 241

Wesley eventually became so convinced of the rightness of women's ministry that he openly encouraged women to preach despite the opposition he knew they would face.

## **7. The Nineteenth Century—Revivalism, the Holiness tradition and the Pentecostal movement**

The nineteenth century was an era of sweeping social change in the western world, and much of it was led by women. Women were key players in the temperance movement, the abolitionist movement, the suffrage movement, and also gave leadership to what became the Sunday School movement.

One nineteenth century group that encouraged women to actively engage in public ministry was the Salvation Army. Founded in London in 1865 by William and Catharine Booth and worked initially with the "undesirables" of society. Catharine Booth had this to say about the limits traditionally placed on women by the church. "Judging from the blessed results which have almost invariably followed the ministrations of women in the cause of Christ we fear it will be found in the great day of account that a mistaken and unjustifiable application of the passage "let your women keep silence in the churches" has resulted in more loss to the church, evil to the world and dishonor to God than any of the errors we have already referred to" Tucker & Liefeld, 13

A.B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defended his open policy for women in ministry. This is, he said, "an issue which God has already settled not only in his word but in his Providence by the seal which he is placing in this very day in every part of the world upon the public work of consecrated Christian women." He concluded by chiding the pastor who led the attack. "Dear brother, let the Lord manage the women. He can do it better than you and you turn your batteries against the common enemy." Tucker & Liefeld, 288

## **8. The Twentieth Century**

The twentieth century brought enormous change.

The missionary movement has often been the context for innovation and change, and so it has been in relation to the roles women play.

"I wasn't God's first choice for what I've done in China . . . I don't know who it was . . . it must have been a man . . . a well-educated man. I don't know what happened. Perhaps he died. Perhaps he wasn't willing . . . and God looked down . . . and saw Gladys Aylward . . . and God said, 'Well, she's willing.'" Gladys Aylward, missionary to China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

The twentieth century has also had its share of voices concerned about the dangers of feminism.

"The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians." — Pat Robertson, in a fundraising letter, July 1992

“Feminism in the churches is a blight that has grieved God and made ineffectual his power and it has disillusioned the people and lost their confidence. I have no doubt that millions will go to hell because of the unscriptural practice of women preachers.”

John Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives and Women Preachers*, quoted in Tucker & Liefeld, 14

### **9. The terms that frame today’s discussion: Complementarian & Egalitarian**

In 1987 a group of evangelical leaders met in Danvers, Massachusetts, and adopted what came to be known as the *Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. The Danvers Statement articulated what commonly came to be called complementarianism: the view that men and women are complementary, possessing equal dignity and worth as the image of God, but called to different roles.

CMC officially adopted the Danvers Statement for a time, before replacing it with the current CMC Statement of Practice in 2007.

“To honor the principle of male headship, CMC reserves ministerial license and ordination for men.” But it’s more complicated than that when it comes to deciding what actually happens in congregations and institutions. The CMC Statement goes on to say: “Within congregations, other roles of governance and/or teaching may be reserved for men.” That means practice within the Conference can vary a lot. It could mean that women would preach or serve as elders, since in our tradition ordination is not required for either of those roles. Or it might mean that women don’t participate in public services in any way.

Kathy Keller, who along with her husband, Tim, founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, describes the Redeemer model: “The corollary of not ordaining women is to make sure that every role legitimately open to unordained men and women is filled with women as well as men.” Keller, *Jesus, Justice and Gender Roles*, 34

### **10. Conclusion**

I believe that one of the urgent challenges for CMC and for any church embracing a complementarian understanding of Scripture is to work very hard to distinguish between what Scripture teaches and what we’ve inherited from a centuries-old patriarchy that is anything but Scriptural. This will take wisdom and it will take courage. It will take wisdom because it is not obvious exactly how the details should be worked out. And it will take courage for two reasons: first, because the process is certain to challenge longstanding practices in the church that are rooted less in Scripture than in our own long tradition, and second, because every version of complementarian practice flies in the face of current cultural trends.

With regard to the questions we’re discussing today, we will need more than, “It makes sense to me!” We will need to study carefully. We will need to reaffirm our commitment to Scripture as our final authority. We will need to be willing humbly to reconsider practices that may be old but not finally rooted in Scripture. We will need to consider the likelihood that some of the ways women have been restricted in our churches are not so much required by Scripture as suggested by our cultural heritage.

A church that restricts the roles of women is unremarkable in a social context that devalues women and also restricts what they do. I wonder what Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas and Luther would say if they could return to our world for a visit. They might be shocked to see the way remarkably gifted women have excelled in education, business and the arts. They would realize, as we do, that much of what the church has said about women in centuries past is simply nonsense.

And that’s why discussing these things is so important. If CMC is to remain complementarian in conviction and practice, it will be only because we have studied carefully what Scripture teaches and concluded that it is a position we must hold.