

## Women in Ministry: Prophecy, Principle, Practice

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From *Communion* (A publication of Church of God Ministries, Anderson, Indiana)  
March-April 2010, Volume 11, Number 5.  
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Recently, I was invited to teach a Sunday school class at a church I was visiting. Sixteen of the seventeen people in the class were not from Church of God background. We talked about our heritage and core beliefs. I mentioned that the Church of God has taught from the beginning that women are equal and called by God to be pastors and other church leaders. “I don’t think we can do that,” a woman in the class said, a very nice woman from a faith tradition that has never allowed women as pastors.

Our churches are filled with people who come from traditions that do not value women in ministerial leadership. While respecting differences, we sometimes have been too silent about our rich tradition and Bible-based teachings regarding women in ministry.

The New Testament recognizes women in leadership, both in teaching and in practice. On the day that is often called the birthday of the church, in his preaching Peter quoted the prophet Joel, proclaiming his prophecy fulfilled in Christ: “In those days I will pour out my Spirit upon all my servants, *men and women alike*, and they will prophesy [speak the word of the Lord]” (Acts 2:18 NLT, emphasis added). Writing to the Galatians, Paul gives us a great overriding vision of barriers that fall in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, *male nor female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NIV, emphasis added).

In the first century church, we see these teachings put into practice. Phillip had four daughters who were preachers (Acts 21:8–9). In the New Testament, prophecy is not predicting the future; it is speaking the word of the Lord. In Romans 16:1–2, Paul speaks of Phoebe, a deaconess. (*Deaconess* is the feminine form of *deacon*.) In fact, the Roman church is instructed to “help her in whatever she may require from you” (NRSV).

But in the New Testament there are also passages that seem to take an opposing view:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. (1 Tim 2:11-12 NIV)

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace...women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they

want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Cor 14:33–34 NIV)

How do we understand such apparent inconsistencies in Scripture? When there are inconsistencies, we must understand that Scripture is speaking to the culture and to a specific situation in the context of the culture. The Christian faith is a great paradox. It can be proclaimed and accepted in every culture while at the same time speaking to and changing every culture.

And there is a great truth here. Paul's first agenda was making disciples. In some places, the very thought of women speaking out and taking leadership would destroy any hope of winning people to Christ. In those places, Paul did not hesitate to tell women to be silent. Some things are more important than demanding our rights. For example, a missionary once told me his wife walked behind him in the country where they served. The custom was firmly ingrained in the local culture. I asked his wife why she accepted that. Her answer was that they went to win people to Christ, so she was willing to walk behind her husband. It is not always about rights.

Here in North America, there are still those who are against women serving in ministerial leadership positions. But the Church of God has historically proclaimed that in Christ there is no male or female. From our earliest beginnings, the Church of God has encouraged and placed women in ministry leadership positions. This has been our teaching and doctrine within the Church of God based on a solid biblical foundation. F. G. Smith, in 1914, wrote in his classic book *What the Bible Teaches*:

From many considerations it is evident that Paul recognized women's place in the gospel. He wrote to the Philippians, "Help those women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow labors, whose names are in the book of life" (4:3). Clement was a minister, and these women are ranked with him and others as Paul's fellow labors in the gospel of Christ. "Fellow laborers" means labors together on the same plane and in the same work. This was only carrying out in a practical way the teaching of the Apostle that in Christ Jesus there is "neither male nor female." (Condensed edition, Anderson: IN: Warner Press, 1995, 102–3)

Yet in spite of our historical teachings, many women pastors are denied the opportunity to serve as senior pastors within our fellowship. How ironic that from within our very history we have encouraged and placed women in leadership roles and yet even today many congregations reject the possibility of a woman serving as senior pastor.

So, what should we do? Now is the time for us to proclaim what God has done in Christ: Those barriers that divide and separate must fall. In the New Testament we find:

- The prophecy of the Spirit poured upon all, male and female.
- The principle that in Christ we are neither male nor female.
- The practice of women being leaders in the church.

God has gifted so many, male and female, with unique and wonderful gifts to be used in ministry. Why should we not allow all who are gifted and called to serve? It is essential that pastors teach our shared doctrine, helping their congregations to understand why we believe in the vital role of women in leadership.

When I consider the women I know serving as senior pastors, I see skilled and gifted preachers, visionary leaders, caring shepherds of their flocks, and so much more. So I wonder how so many

congregations simply will not consider a woman as a senior pastor, content, in essence, to allow such gifts to be laid aside?

Imagine the confusion and frustration of sensing the call of God on your life but then being rejected because of your gender. What would it be like to read and hear that in the Church of God we believe that God calls male and female in the ministry yet see that we do not practice it? So, I ask, what would it be like if we really did start actually living what we teach?

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