

A BIBLICAL BASIS FOR WOMEN ELDERS?

(Workshop:Valerie and Michael Griffiths)

PREAMBLE: While many larger Christian denominations have now accepted that there are no Biblical restrictions on spiritual gifts and abilities given to women, conservative minorities within those groups, and many independent groupings still genuinely and sincerely believe that Scripture forbids certain roles to one human gender, and exclude 50% of their membership from exercising certain spiritual gifts. Moreover, they think that those of us whose Biblical hermeneutic sees no restriction in the gifts the sovereign Lord gives to women are influenced by the spirit of the age and are Biblically “liberal”, disregarding what (to them) seems clearly stated in Scripture. Because of the variety of independent Christian congregations where this is an issue, it is not going to be easy to arrive at a satisfactory resolution. Even persuading such well-meaning Christian brothers and sisters that this is not cultural compromise but essentially an issue of Biblical interpretation is going to be difficult. However, the following Biblical Propositions may help to demonstrate that it is primarily a Hermeneutic issue and that no way are we Egalitarians denying Scripture because of changing contemporary cultures. Equally we may feel that there are cultural and sociological presuppositions and patriarchal prejudices about women underlying their interpretation of Scripture, although many of them would hotly and sincerely deny it. This is emphatically not a difference regarding the reliability and authority of Scripture, but rather of different human interpretations of Scriptural passages. Ordinary human commonsense would suggest that when a church has plural leadership, that it would be rather foolish not to include women as well as men. However, sincere Christian brothers and sisters disagree, because they think this is contrary to Biblical teaching. We hope to demonstrate now that this is by no means so, and to show that a good Biblical case can be made for the inclusion of women in plural leadership. Similarly that there seems no Biblical evidence that the Holy Spirit’s distribution of gifts is restricted along gender lines.

1. BIBLICAL GRAMMAR. The Greek language of the New Testament lacks a common plural. It can produce male and female singular words, and plural words for groups made up only of males and only of females. Unfortunately it does not have a grammatical form for a mixed group of both genders, and therefore commonly uses the masculine plural form instead. Some obvious examples: disciples (mathntoi), although the female form (mathetria) occurs in **Acts 6:36**; brethren (while words both for a singular brother and sister exist) the common form “adelphoi” could refer to a group made up only of male siblings, but addressed to churches means “brothers and sisters”. The same goes for saints (agioi); believers (pistoι) **Acts 10:45; 16:1; 1Tim.4:10**; and Christians (Christianoi), which hopefully create no problem at all for any of us: because we believe women as well as men can be included among disciples, brethren, saints, believers and Christians. So also are ‘eyewitnesses and servants of the word’ (**Lk.1:2**) from whom Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, gained his understanding of the events he records (**Lk.23:49, 55; 24: 1, 9-11,22-24**). Clearly significant eyewitnesses were female. However the plurals ‘deacons’ & ‘elders’ may challenge the preconceptions and prejudices of some. We meet plurals for “old men”(presbuteroi) and for “old ladies” (presbuterai **1Tim.5:2, Tit.2:3**), but when confronted with “presbuteroi” in the sense of “elders” it could mean both a group of all male elders OR equally a mixed group of both men and women. Grammatically speaking, there is no difficulty in understanding “elders” to mean that the plural leadership of local churches in the New Testament included Christians of both genders.

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 1. There are no grammatical reasons why women should not be included in plural church leadership. The plural word “elders” could refer to a mixed group.

2. BIBLICAL WORKING MODEL. Unintentionally we may ignore Biblical evidence of Apostolic fellowship with devoted Christian women. **Luke 8:1-3; Luke 23-24; Acts 1: 14.** Our common stereotypical view is of the Lord travelling with a peer group of twelve **men**, and even more of just ten or eleven **men** with Him in the upper room at the time of the resurrection appearances. **Careful reading of the text shows that both of these impressions are false.** **Luke 8:3** clearly associates a substantial number of women, with the Twelve. The Lord Jesus himself allows these Galilean women to travel with the Twelve. Three women are named and then “**with many others also**” (having already named three) suggests near parity with the twelve men. The same group of women “who followed him from Galilee” become important in **Luke 23:49,55; 24:1, 9-11, 22, 23** as the only witnesses linking the three events of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Bauckham¹ has shown recently that before the availability of written New Testament scripture the oral testimony of female witnesses of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ made them of great importance as “**eyewitness and servants of the word**” (**Lk.1:2**). Clearly the Lord Himself had no problem in allowing these women to share in His new *ekklesia* in process of formation. **Luke 24:33** speaks of the Eleven “**and those with them**”. (If this was in the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, as in **Acts 12:12** she would have been one of them). **Acts 1:14** having listed the Eleven, shows that they also have no problem in including women with themselves in the praying (steering?) group waiting for Pentecost. **vs.15** (NIV) “believers” is actually “brethren” some 120 in number and addressed by Peter using the common plural. Recently Richard Bauckham has made a credible case that the Joanna of **Lk.8:3 & 24:10** a witness of the resurrection may be the same person, if you Romanise her name, as the named apostle Junia of **Rom.16:7**.² The evangelical Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, an acknowledged Gospels scholar, made the interesting point at the recent Durham Men, Women and God (UK) and Christians for Biblical Equality (US) Conference that women witnesses of the resurrection actually fulfilled the conditions for apostlicity (**Acts 1:22,23**) before any of the men!

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 2. The Lord Jesus Himself included women in his itinerant group (in numbers equivalent to and in the context of the Twelve), and that inclusion was continued by the Eleven after the Resurrection. Neither the Lord Jesus nor the Twelve had problems in associating devoted women alongside themselves. Including women alongside men in plural leadership, therefore, seems entirely in accord with dominical and apostolic practice, revealed to us in Scripture. Excluding them does not seem in accord with the practice of the Lord or his apostles. The model involves both men and women serving together.

3. BIBLICAL GIFTS . It is an instructive exercise to review Biblical lists of spiritual gifts, and to discover whether we can find named individuals of one or both genders exercising specific spiritual gifts. The New Testament lists specific roles (i.e. apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, elders and deacons), **but only names a few males or females specifically exercising any specific spiritual gift.** Though we cannot always name women specifically exercising every one of these gifts, it is equally difficult to name male individuals exercising every one of these roles either.³

A. Instances of both named men and women who are called apostles, prophets and deacons.

¹ Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women; Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels, (London: T & T.Clark, 2002)

² *ibid.*

³ Michael Griffiths, Serving Grace: Gifts without Inverted Commas, (London: MARC Europe, 1986) p.107ff.

Apostle We have the case of Junia named as an ‘apostle’ (**Rom.16:7**) in the same sense wider than the Twelve used of Paul, Barnabas, Andronicus, Silas, Timothy, Titus.. Junia may well be the Romanised name of Joanna of **Lk.8:3**.⁴ See also Cranfield on Romans 16.⁵

Prophet we have Mary, Elizabeth and Anna, at the beginning of Luke, and Stephen’s unnamed prophesying daughters in **Acts 21:9** (compare also **1Co.11:5 ; 14:31**).

Deacon Phoebe in **Rom.16:1; 1Tim.3:11ff** (use of the class marker ‘likewise’ (*hosautos*) indicates parallel classes; the absence of possessive “their wives” ,and no mention of bishop’s wives seems to show that female deacons, rather than deacon’s wives are intended here.

B. Instances of named men or women specifically described as evangelists, teachers, pastors or elders are much less common or are not found at all.

Philip is called “the evangelist” (**Acts 21:8**) while Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen and Saul are called as a group “prophets and teachers” (**Acts 13:1f**), without saying which of the five were which, and possibly implying that all were both. The close association of teaching with prophesying (**1Cor.14:31** “You can all prophesy in turn so that everyone will be instructed. . .) suggests that if named women prophesied, then inevitably they must have also taught. Priscilla certainly explained things more clearly to the brilliant Apollos. No specific male nor a specific female is ever specifically named as being a ‘pastor’. Plural ‘elders’ are a more complex issue as we shall see below.

C. A wide range of other nouns and verbs are used to describe the activity of men and women.

Verbs and other words are used of male individuals e.g. Clement (**Phil.4:3**); Tychichus, Epaphras, Archippus (**Col.4:7,12,17**); Philemon & Archippus again (**Philemon 1,2**) and female individuals like Phoebe (*prostatis*), Priscilla (fellowworker), Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis (‘laboured in the Lord’); Lydia, Euodia & Syntyche (**Phil.4:3,4** *sunathlountes, sunergetes*), seem to suggest that women did exercise significant active roles within early congregations. No named woman is specifically identified as an “elder”, or presider (*prohistaminos*) though Phoebe (**Rom.16:2**) is actually called by a cognate *prostatis* (the masculine form of which is used in Clement for Christ as “guardian” of the church). This noun is often edited out using the dynamic (non) equivalent “help” or “succour” but carries the stronger authority of benefactress or “patroness”⁶. Sociologically the same status may be accorded to other women in whose homes Christian congregations met: Mary, mother of Mark (**Acts 12:12**); Lydia (**Acts16:15,40**), Priscilla (**Acts 18:18,19; Rom.16:5, 1Co.16:19**); Phoebe (**Rom.16:1**), Nympha (**Col.4:15**) and Appia (**Philemon 2**). Did they merely serve refreshments, or were they accepted in some sense as leaders of the congregations meeting in their homes, and of which as citizens they were sponsors recognised by the authorities?

D. The specific issue of ‘elder’ is instructive in that while Peter calls himself an elder (**1Pet.5:1**) and it is assumed that ‘the elder’ (**II John:1; III John: 1**) must be John, that apart from these named apostles, most readers of the Bible people would be hard put to name any others specifically named as elders. While, apart from the apostle Peter, and possibly John, not a single man or woman is ever specifically named as an elder, a consideration of the Ephesian elders summoned to meet Paul at Miletus becomes important. Can we find named individuals connected with Ephesus who might have met Paul at Miletus? Luke names several members of Paul’s team in Ephesus (**Acts 18:19; 19:22, 29**), but Priscilla and Aquila were resident founder members of this congregation (**Acts 18:19**), where she subsequently put straight the gifted Apollos. In **Acts 20: 29,30** Paul had warned the Ephesian elders of the danger of wolves from without and doctrinally woolly sheep from within. How real was this danger? Paul was

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women; Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, (London: T & T.Clark, 2002)

⁵ C.B.Cranfield, *Romans Vol.2,IC.C.Series*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1959) p.788,9)

⁶ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, (London: Yale University Press, 1983) p.60

speaking prophetically, but by the time he was writing Acts, Luke knew it had actually happened: Timothy had been left behind in Ephesus to stop false teaching by certain **persons** (**1Tim.1:3** not just “men” as the original NIV translation for there would seem to have been women false teachers as well **1Tim.2:12**) and all that follows in that letter. The Letters to the Seven Churches (**Rev.Ch.2-3**) show that the survival of some congregations was threatened by false teaching, some given by women! The extent of the danger can be measured when we ask whether we know the names of any of these “elders” (**vs.17**) or “overseers” (**vs.28**)? Who were the elders listening to Paul’s warning in his Miletus address? The Pastoral Epistles give names of excommunicated or otherwise criticised leading personalities in Ephesus. **Hymeneus** and **Alexander** (excommunicated for false teaching **1Tim.1:20**); **Phygelus** and **Hermogenes** (who deserted **2Tim.1:15**); and **Philetus** (together with Hymeneus again “who have wandered away from the truth” **2Tim.2:17**). If these five were among the elders they do not seem a very promising lot! No wonder Paul had to give extensive guidelines for replacing them in **1Tim.3**. Fortunately we also know the name of **Onesiphorus**, a reliable good guy (**2Tim.1:16-18**). Unless they had already moved back to Rome, it seems probable that **Aquila** would also have served as an elder, as he had been a founding leader of the congregation since **Acts 18:19**. This then raises an interesting question. In view of the fact that Priscilla’s name precedes her husband’s on four of the six occasions their names are mentioned bracketed together (Aquila first in **Acts 18:2**; **1Co.16:19** and Prisca first in **Acts18:18, 26**; **Rom.16:3**; **2Tim.4:19**), it raises the interesting possibility that Prisca may also have served in some such leadership capacity. It is a speculative question to which we can give no emphatic or dogmatic answer: but it seems clear from **Acts 18:18,26** that Priscilla was a moving spirit in founding the Ephesian congregation. We have no idea if she was ever actually called an “an elder” but she seems actively involved in some kind of congregational leadership from the outset. Could you have invited Aquila and left Priscilla out?

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 3. The Acts and the Epistles show that women exercised significant roles in the early churches. No woman is ever named as an elder, but then apart from the apostle Peter (and possibly John) no man is ever specifically so named either.

4. BIBLICAL CULTURE AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE.

Because of conservative suspicion that it is a post-modern or feminist mindset that underlines Egalitarians Biblical hermeneutic, it always seems wiser to avoid using cultural arguments – e.g. ‘women today are better educated’, ‘women today are the backbone of the church’, or even to argue some kind of significant paradigm shift in Biblical interpretation from the highly significant **Acts 2:16-21**. However, we cannot deny that the New Testament documents come to us in the context of their contemporary cultural and historical background. Good Biblical exposition requires the faithful expositor not to ignore, but to take into account, cultural factors in first century Graeco-Roman world of which there is much evidence.

- (i) Archaeological evidence: female leadership e.g. Plancia Magna in Perga.
- (ii) Inscriptional evidence of named women leading synagogues in 1st century Asia Minor (Paul Trebilco)⁷.
- (iii) Biblical evidence: Phoebe, Prisca, Junia, Mary, Persis, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia, Syntyche.

Andrew Perryman⁸ causes us to rethink our tactics in arguing from Biblical text alone.

Aristotle: “The male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject” (Politics 1254b2 [1.2.12] Loeb).

⁷ Paul Trebilco, Jewish Communities in Asia Minor, (Cambridge: CUP, 1991)

⁸ Andrew Perriman, “Speaking of Women –Interpreting Paul” (Leicester: Apollos, IVP: 1998) p.53

Josephus: “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man.” (Against Apion 2.201, Loeb)

Plutarch: “Control ought to be exercised by the man over the woman, not as the owner has control of a piece of property, but, as the soul controls the body, by entering into her feelings and being knit to her through goodwill. As, therefore, it is possible to exercise care over the body without being a slave to its pleasures and desires, so it is possible to govern a wife, and at the same time to delight and gratify her” (Moralia 142E, Loeb)

Paul is writing within a culture that shares these attitudes, and Scripture has to be read in that context. [To give an example, we assume people go to prison as a punishment, because they do in our 21st century culture, but the Romans only put people in prison either to await trial or await execution. So we must read what Scripture says about prison in the light of its first century context.] The same has to be true of what Scripture has to say about the role of women in the church and in leadership. Thus Perryman writes:

“(Paul) is not teaching them to be subordinate, but how to deal with the subordination that society generally expected of them. N. Baumert (1996:318) says, “The actual ethical-theological statement of the apostle is probably: “accept the position appropriate to you under the contemporary circumstances”

On this understanding Christian women have to find “in the Lord” what is appropriate in their culture in their own particular time and place. Cultural prejudices (and changes) cannot be ignored in counselling Christians on appropriate behaviour. [Christians living in Islamic areas may refrain from eating pork and bacon, and adopt the local dress codes.]

BIBLICAL PROPOSITION 4.

N.T. Christians could not ignore the conventions of their cultures, and sub-cultures, any more than we can. So while exegesis must remain the controlling factor, we recognise that inevitably we cannot totally ignore our contemporary cultures and political correctness either.

CONCLUSION - the Biblical case for excluding women from plural leadership begins to seem somewhat thin! Some Scriptures may be understood in such a way as to support the argument that congregational leadership groups ought normally to contain people of both genders. The great thematic statement of Peter’s quotation from Joel in **Acts 2:17-18** would seem to support that from now on under the New Covenant, both genders “sons and daughters...menservants and maidservants” will be endowed with the gifts of the Spirit, and we should not silence those whom God Himself has gifted. There seems no Biblical support for the notion that spiritual gifts of administrations (**1Co.12:28**) and teaching are only given to men and never given to women. To forbid the exercise of spiritual gifts received by some women, purely on account of gender is to quench the Spirit. The churches should facilitate and liberate all the gifts given to its members, both men and women.

The book Valerie mentioned is the one by Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women; Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels, (London: T & T.Clark, 2002)