

WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE ASSEMBLIES

An Assessment of Bible Teaching

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FOREWORD

The following pages were written after considerable exercise occasioned by recent pronouncements appearing in a widely circulating magazine, *The Christian*. Apprehension has been expressed lest the statements appearing in the article should be taken as the considered judgment of leaders in those groups of Christians referred to as 'Christian Brethren'. We are chiefly concerned over the answers given to the question whether sisters should be permitted to take part orally in public gatherings of the church, and have been greatly indebted to two booklets dealing with the subject, namely, William Hoste's *Sisters' Service*, and *The Ministry of Women*, a joint production by C. F. Hogg, W. E. Vine, and W. R. Lewis. We hope that the investigation has been undertaken without rancour, and that it will promote a healthy study of the passages relevant to the theme. Human opinion and expediency are to be discounted.

Women's Place in the Assemblies

CHAPTER ONE—INTRODUCTION

The following pages may be of only partial interest to the general public, for they have specifically in view members of those Christian communities commonly known as "Brethren", a title which many of themselves disclaim, in so far as the name is spelt with a capital B. Since the commencement of the movement around 1830 which gave rise to the ridiculous title "Plymouth Brethren" (because one of the earliest gatherings was in that town), the gatherings have been called not churches but "Assemblies", the name being chosen to avoid the use of the word 'church', which for centuries had been employed to designate a building rather than a gathering of Christians. Consequently, the expression, 'Assemblies of Christian Brethren', has come to be accepted by many; both within and without the movement, as a means of distinguishing them from the denominations in Christendom. That title, however, does not have favour with those who are particular about a proper nomenclature, and for these reasons:

(1) 'Christian Brethren' is a misnomer, because in its restricted use it allocates to a few a name which belongs to all Christians. All Christians are 'brethren', and it is both arrogant and confusing for the few to accept for themselves a title which properly designates many others of the same religious persuasion. Genuine Christians in other communities have a just grievance at an attitude which some of them condemn as presumption, as if only those who call themselves 'Christian Brethren' were entitled to consider themselves members of the true Church. The use of the title on notice boards and advertisements in the press is to be deprecated. It is most disappointing and, in measure, disconcerting, to read in an article on *The Brethren* printed in a recent issue of the weekly periodical, *The Christian*, the following statement:

"The effort to avoid the use of any name has obscured our 'image', damaged our witness, and left us with a variety of attitudes and practices in the matter. We are still known most widely as Plymouth Brethren, and have only ourselves to blame for this rather ridiculous title. I hope the term

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'Christian Brethren', or something similar, will radically achieve standardisation. We cannot afford any more of the past muddle." The writer of that statement, Alastair W. R. Allcock, speaks only for himself, or for a small coterie of like-minded thinkers, who have no authority to make pronouncements of that nature. Those people are having the temerity to jettison the attitude adopted by many others for over a century.

On the other hand, Professor F. F. Bruce of Manchester answered the question, "In the past Brethren have tried to avoid the use of any name and disclaimed denominational status. Is this still tenable to-day?" in the following refreshing language: "Yes, where the complete autonomy of the local church is maintained. The church to which I belong, for example, (describing itself on its notice board as 'a centre for Christian Worship and Witness') has no denominational link with any others." Because of what it unwittingly implies the title 'Christian Brethren' is not only unscriptural, it is undesirable, and should be avoided by those who are commonly designated as such. They are simply 'Christians'.

(2) The title 'Christian Brethren' is to be avoided because it savours of denominationalism. The majority of responsible members of the communities so named would maintain that they do not belong to or subscribe to the idea of a denomination. Another writer in the article referred to above goes so far as to declare: "My own Assembly is called an Evangelical Church, . . . All balanced Brethren members would acknowledge that we are one of the evangelical denominations." That affirmation is not true, and is a contradiction of the writer's claim that his 'own Assembly' is independent or autonomous. To recognize denominational status is tantamount to sectarianism, and the movement out from the contemporary religious set-up by a few Christian men in Dublin, (among them J. N. Darby, J. B. Bellett and Anthony Norris Groves) was a protest against the prevailing sectarian spirit engendered by the denominations in that city. That, however, was not the first protest of its kind. Church history records numerous such protests, both before and after the Reformation, but those earlier protests did not make the impact on the religious life of Christendom such as the Dublin movement had and is still having.

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Answering a question on the subject, "Are 'Brethren' A Sect?" C. F. Hogg wrote: "Scripture knows nothing of an association of churches. In the New Testament each church is planted and grows independently of all others; churches are never seen associated for any common purpose; each is directly answerable to the Lord alone. In our own day there is no such body as 'Open Brethren', inasmuch as each company seeking to carry out what they find written is responsible, not to any other, or to any circle, but to the Lord alone. Thus these companies are not sects in the ordinary acceptation of the term; they do not belong to any organised body of professing Christians." (*What Saith The Scriptures?*)

Writing in a similar strain William Hoste gives his understanding of the situation thus: "The whole question of the existence of the simple assemblies of Christians, accepting no other name, is involved in this query. Why do such meetings exist? What was their origin? Are they merely 'the Brethren', one of the many sects of Christendom? . . . Little as it may be admitted in the religious world, or even understood in some quarters by those forming part of the said assemblies, their origin was something quite different. It was the result of a distinct work of the Holy Spirit, opening the eyes of some of His people to the sad and evil conditions of Christendom in general, and to see in Christ God's one and only centre of gathering for His saints, as He is God's only Saviour of sinners. This resulted in many of the Lord's people coming out of the various denominations in which they found themselves, to gather to His name alone. . . . There was, at the beginning, great spiritual joy, power and blessing to saint and sinner, and much glory was brought to the name of the Lord. But through lack of vigilance and mutual forbearance, Satan at an early date sowed seeds of discord, and divisions have taken place which are very dishonouring and grievous to the Lord and humbling to His people" (*Bible Problems and Answers*).

This rather lengthy introduction has been deemed necessary to give the true perspective in which to approach the theme of our treatise, which is concerned with certain matters affecting more intimately the simple Assemblies of the Lord's people professedly dissociated from the organized denominations in Christendom.

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CHAPTER TWO—OBEDIENCE COUNTS

The subject which concerns us at present is Women's Work in the Assemblies. As the members of those Assemblies professedly regulate their gatherings according to the Scriptures, it is only consistent that obedience thereto should extend to every aspect of church activity. There is ever present the danger of discarding the plain teaching of the Bible by following practices advocated by organized religious communities which have drifted from the simplicity of the early church as recorded in the New Testament, and been unwilling to abide by the unambiguous injunctions of Apostolic-writings. Custom is no reliable guide. Tradition, though hoary, may be astray.

Obedience is what counts with God, and unless there is confirmed conviction about the New Testament reading on the matter under consideration compromise is easy. Human nature, even in the best of us, resents being considered peculiar; consequently the desire to align one's practice with that which is common in one's environment is sometimes due, although not always, to the pull of popularity. Excuses are easy to make, and Scripture tends to be interpreted in the light of one's own practice.

There is growing need to restate the New Testament teaching about woman's place in a local church, for young people are growing up in an atmosphere significantly different from that in which their parents were nurtured. Our generation has witnessed a rapidly increasing clamour for women's equality with men. The advance of so-called democratic thinking has given to women a place and importance which they previously did not occupy. The emancipation of women, begun in the nineteenth century, has opened doors that once were firmly closed against them. The introduction, first of universal elementary education, later to be extended to secondary education, then the opening of universities to the female sex, have provided for women the opportunity to compete with men in the academic world; and many women have proved themselves as capable of advanced learning as the most brilliant of men. They now occupy posts of the highest responsibility in almost every walk of professional life. In industry and commerce the trend has been in the same

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direction, and since the victories won by the Suffragette Movement at the beginning of this century, women have been taking an active part in the politics of this country. So striking has been the advance that there are not only women in Parliament, but even Cabinet posts in the Government have been given to women of outstanding ability. Equality of opportunity has ultimately led to equality of position. That spirit created by the recent trend has invaded two spheres where it is an intrusion, the home and the Church.

Abroad is the spirit of lawlessness. The age of permissiveness is with us, and the atmosphere is impregnated with the desire for self-expression. One danger of the present situation is that the younger generation of Christians in the Assemblies we have in mind may be tempted to cast off restraint and advocate policies and practices which run contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. Another has written, "Submission to the plain direction of Scripture no doubt still requires in our day of lawlessness increasing grace on the part of sisters; but such will have an abundant reward in that day, and will never lack now a sphere of true service." (*Wm. Hoste*).

This problem of women's ministry in the Church has been made more complicated and confusing by the teaching and practice in other religious communities. For some time in several denominations women have been 'ordained' and have been occupying the pulpit. They have become recognized as religious leaders among their people. Even there not all are happy about the situation, and some are prepared to voice their dissent. Dr. Wilkinson Riddle, commenting on the subject, refers to the discussion about women in the ministry at the recent Lambeth Convention of Anglican bishops, and remarks, "The Archbishop of York, with good reason, is all for it; the Archbishop of Sydney is all against it, evidently with equally good reason. I doubt whether any amount of argument would make either Archbishop change his mind. With love and charity they must agree to differ, and to respect each other's opinion." (*The Christian Herald*, October 26, 1968).

Can the dilemma be resolved in such a fashion by leaving each to respect the *opinion* of the other? Is the proper attitude not that of asking the question *What saith the Scripture?*

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Surely that should be the final court of appeal. Expediency is no reason for the violation of the plain statements of the New Testament.

It may be pertinent to ask, Is the change of front among religious leaders not one of expediency? It is only within comparatively recent years that there has been a growing agitation by advocates of women's public ministry in the churches. Why? Is it not because the falling-off of male candidates for the ministry has created an acute shortage in most denominations, with the result that charges have remained without clergymen for considerable periods? Pulpit supply has been difficult. One solution to the problem, in some ways an easy solution, although not without opposition from the more conservative minded, was to throw open the ministry to women with the hope that the defect would be remedied. Viewed in that light the situation is a reflection upon the menfolk in the respective denominations. It was when men failed God in Old Testament times, that women were raised up to be leaders, as witness the case of Deborah who took precedence of Barak when the latter was afraid to lead his army against Sisera, captain of the army of Jabin, King of Canaan. Deborah said, "I will surely go with thee; notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour, for the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." (Judges 4.9). Does the present situation not savour something of the same nature? Women are putting men to shame; and those Old Testament narratives are "a warning that the churches would do well to take to heart, and more so at the present time, because of the modern defiance of God in the refusal of the divine, and natural order . . . when men-brethren default in their proper responsibilities, God will see that His work is done, indeed, for He will have His Deborahs ready, but, as with Barak, to their shame and loss." (*C. F. Hogg*).

Women may reasonably contend that nowhere in the Bible is there the slightest suggestion that the woman is inferior to the man. That is undeniably true. In fact, modern woman's emancipation from the degraded position into which she had been brought through men's ignorance of the Bible is due to the application of Biblical principles advocated after the Reformation in the sixteenth century, when men began to

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have access to the Scriptures, a privilege which for centuries during the Dark Ages had been denied them. The Bible teaches that the woman was created to be a help meet (suited) for the man, being complementary to him, and not his rival for headship in the domestic set-up. In the beginning they were created 'male and female' (Gen. 2.23). Strangely it is being argued, even by some in the Assemblies who advocate women's participation in public church gatherings, that the distinction 'male and female' ceases to operate in the churches, since it is written, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3.28). To apply that statement in a functional fashion is surely a gross misinterpretation of the passage in its contextual setting. Paul is teaching that in the Christian dispensation distinctions which operate in other conditions cease to be recognized in the family of God. National, social and sex distinctions cease, and all sustain the same relationship to God. There are no 'step-bairns' in God's family, for "ye are all the sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3.26). Function in a local church is not in the passage whatsoever.

CHAPTER THREE—NON-CONFORMITY

One of Paul's inspired injunctions was, "Be not conformed to this age," (Rom. 12.2), an exhortation which has application in areas of Christian living wider than that indicated in the immediate context. The ever-present danger confronting a local church professedly following the plain teaching of the New Testament with regard to church gatherings is the desire to conform to the practices common in neighbouring religious communities where policy and practice are often dictated either by expediency or by worldly-mindedness. The tendency to please and attract the young by the introduction of suspected programmes has become almost universal in religious circles. Local customs have the habit of reproducing themselves in Assemblies unless there is a firm determination by those who have the care of the 'flock' not to abandon 'the old paths' of separation upon which those Assemblies were built.

The atmosphere of the world insidiously infiltrates into religious communities where conformity to the age takes

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precedence over obedience to the plain teaching of the Scriptures. For those who wish to please God in all things the prime consideration in every activity should be, not whether it is attractive and popular, but whether it will promote growth of a spiritual character in those who engage therein. Temporary emotional pleasure and superficial excitement to applause are no standards by which to judge the suitability of any activity in Assembly witness. A little leaven, unless purged out, soon leavens the whole lump. Imitation of worldly procedure in minor details considered of little consequence may gradually lead to the introduction of methods of witnessing unsupported by Scripture. Opposition to such activities in all likelihood will meet with disapproval from those who are not acquainted with the teaching of the New Testament on the subject of women's ministry.

An argument frequently encountered from those who are advocating the more public participation by women in Assembly gatherings is that there are numerous instances in the Old Testament records of the prominence of women in the affairs of the nation of Israel. That goes without gain-saying; but the argument is invalid, because it assumes that what was permissible then is permissible now in a New Testament local church. It is contended that in Old Testament times there were prophetesses who communicated messages to the people. "Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them (i.e. the women) Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea." (Exod. 15.20-21).

Deborah was not only a judge among the people, to the shame of the men of Israel, none of whom was fit to act in that capacity, she was also a prophetess, and composed the song of victory preserved in Judges 5. When the Temple in Jerusalem was being renovated in the reign of good king Josiah, the long lost Book of the Law was discovered, and the king and his courtiers were disturbed when they read its contents. It was to Huldah, the prophetess; Josiah went and made enquiry for guidance.

It is strange that some have taken these examples as justification for advocating public participation by women in

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the preaching of the gospel. "Yet not so strange," writes C. F. Hogg, "in view of the growing ignorance of the Scriptures and lack of intelligence in their interpretation."

Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, probably the oldest woman in Jerusalem, is called a prophetess, perhaps the last of the line of such women in pre-Christian times. What an example she has set for all women who profess the Christian faith; for it is recorded of her that she spoke of the infant Messiah whom she had seen to all them who looked for redemption in Israel! (Luke 2.38). Evidently she had a circle of friends who frequented the Temple, and it was they (perhaps men like Joseph of Arimathea) to whom she witnessed, not publicly, but privately, as she met them during their visits to the Temple. She does not serve as a precedent for those who advocate the public oral ministry of women in a local church.

Argument for such ministry is sometimes founded on the fact that 'Philip the evangelist' had 'four daughters, virgins, who did prophecy.' (Acts 21.9). It is, however, very precarious to build an argument on such a statement, for no indication whatsoever is given that those women exercised their gift in any place other than their own home. The context mentions *the house* of Philip of Caesarea where Paul found hospitality. Strange, too, isn't it? that while the apostle stayed there for many days a prophet named Agabus had to come from Jerusalem to inform him that he would suffer at the hands of the Gentiles if he proceeded to that city. Why were the prophetesses superseded, if their ministry was of great importance? No others are mentioned in The Acts of the Apostles, and that fact in itself may be of disconcerting significance to those who press for the introduction of the public ministry of women into the Assemblies.

It should be borne in mind that prophecy in the New Testament sense of the word has ceased since the canon of Scripture has been closed. The function of the prophet has now been taken by the teacher, as witness 2 Peter 2.1, "But there were false prophets among them (i.e. 'in old time' 1.21), even as there shall be false teachers among you." As regards teaching, the prohibitions with respect to women: "Let your women keep silence in the churches." (1 Cor. 14.34); "I suffer not a woman to teach." (1 Tim. 3.12) are plain enough. The statements are categorical. Only by ignoring apostolic

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teaching on the subject can the advocates of the public ministry of women in the Assemblies find justification for their suggestions. If it is argued that expediency calls for such procedure, and that blessing has accompanied women ministry, it may be replied that violation of unambiguous scripture cannot have divine approval.

Commenting on the narrative in 2 Samuel 6 about the new cart prepared for the transport of the Ark, the note in The New Scofield Bible says, "The story of David's new cart and its results is a striking illustration of the spiritual truth that blessing does not follow the best intentions in the service of God, except as that service is rendered in God's way. God had given explicit directions how the ark should be borne (Num. 4.1-15), but David adopted a Philistine expedient (1 Sam. 6.7-8)."

It should never be forgotten that it is a fundamental canon of interpretation that what is plain and unambiguous should have full weight when the meaning of statements which are not so clear is sought. Scripture is never self-contradictory, and where there are seeming difficulties investigation of a context must be conducted with patience.

CHAPTER FOUR. 1 Corinthians 14.33-35

Two passages call for immediate attention. 1 Corinthians 14.33-35 reads, *For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands (men folk) at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.*

Language could not be plainer. Yet certain brethren who are recognized as making pronouncements with some kind of authority try to evade the issue. In the article appearing in *The Christian* already referred to the question was asked: *Christians in other denominations have difficulty in finding scriptural warrant for the following Brethren practices. The prominence given to the Lord's Supper, and why women are often not permitted to pray audibly in church meetings. Can you comment, please?*

This pamphlet is not concerned with the part of the question

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dealing with the Lord's Supper: we confine ourselves to some of the answers given to the question about the position of women.

H. L. Ellison, who styles himself as a former Anglican Minister, unburdens his mind thus: "So far as the silence of women is concerned, I consider it neither scriptural nor practical."

F. R. Coad, author of *A History of the Brethren Movement*, a most informative and, in some senses, a most heartily provocative book, has answered the question in these words: "I believe that Brethren emphasis derives from a too narrow reliance upon the single proof texts, without stopping to think whether the total structural evidence might not indicate that those particular texts are of local and temporary application."

Allistair W. R. Allcock writes in a slightly different vein: "Secondly, in those fellowships in which I have experienced freedom for ladies in public prayer, I am unimpressed with the aptitude of a woman's temperament and gifts for this role. This may be because they have previously had insufficient opportunity."

Harold H. Rowdon, who recently produced an interesting volume on *The Origins of the Brethren*, made this comment: "I also feel the brethren have sometimes misunderstood and mis-applied Paul's teaching on the place of women in the church, and have not yet heard a satisfying explanation of the whole of 1 Corinthians 11.5."

David C. Rennie compares the importance of the New Testament instruction about the Lord's Supper and Baptism with the information given about women's ministry, and states: "The way of baptism together with the reasons for baptism by immersion upon personal faith in Christ are clearly set out in Holy Scripture. You see we go back to the Bible and use it as our authority. The matters of women praying audibly and 'hats' are of minor importance compared with the foregoing."

Less pretentious and more to the point are the words of C. J. Pickering whose affirmation is in keeping with the more conservative approach by Assemblies in Scotland. His answer is almost blunt in its undisguised clarity, "Brethren accept Paul's injunction as having come from the Lord as his other injunctions did."

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OBSERVATIONS

(1) It is far from true that, as one quotation asserts, there is a growing recognition of the fact that the silence imposed upon women is neither scriptural nor practical. No proof is adduced to show how women's silence is not practical, nor is any attempt made to explain away the positive prohibitions contained in 1 Corinthians 14.34 and 1 Timothy 2.12. There may be in some quarters a concerted attempt to impose on others a practice which does not have scriptural authority, and which certainly does not have the approval of the vast majority meeting in simple New Testament lines. The warning of William Hoste, no mean scholar and a fastidious upholder of New Testament principles, may not be out of place: "While in certain circles every scriptural barrier has long since been swept away, misgivings are arising among some to whom, but a short time back, the Word of God spoke with no uncertain sound, and they are asking whether we ought not, in view of the prominence given to women in the world and Christendom to-day in most denominations, to revise somewhat our position. Certainly we ought, if it does not bear the test of the Word of God. But before accepting any 'new light', let us be sure it is of God, and not some device of the enemy to lead us away from the light of His Word." (*Sisters' Service*).

(2) F. R. Coad thinks that the particular proof texts (1 Cor. 14.34 and 1 Tim. 2.12) upon which is based the practice of women's silence may be only of local and temporary application. That is an assumption which he might discover it difficult to maintain, for the prohibition is introduced by the words, "As in all the churches of the saints." (1 Cor. 14.33). Corinth was not the only place to which Paul wrote in that definite strain. Years later he gave similar instructions to Timothy to convey to his Christian friends in Ephesus. To enforce the gravity of his words to the Corinthians Paul wrote, almost, one would conclude, with a touch of sarcasm, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are *the commandments of the Lord*." (1 Cor. 14.37). The prohibition sent by Paul is not to be rescinded by the pen of a modern commentator who prefers to believe that too much

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reliance may be placed upon certain specific proof texts. Upon what else could reliance be placed? C. R. Coad thinks that consideration of 'the total structural evidence' might disclose that the practice so long adhered to might be unscriptural. If he means by 'total structural evidence', the evidence gathered from other areas of the New Testament, he might find it difficult to sustain his argument, for there is not a single passage which can be quoted to give positive proof that women in New Testament churches participated in public ministry.

Another lengthy quotation from William Hoste's booklet puts the matter in its true scriptural perspective: "We have already seen that the service of women in the Acts was personal and private. The general teachings of it and the Epistles only bear out this view. Might we not have looked for at least one woman among the seven almoners of chapter 6, or among the prophets and teachers at Antioch in chapter 13? Why do we find no woman's name mentioned in the Acts as associated with the Apostles in their journeys (e.g. chapter 20.4), nor one woman cited in 1 Cor. 15 as a witness to the resurrection of the Lord (though women were highly favoured by post-resurrection manifestations of their Lord)? Why was the authorship of no single book of the New Testament (not to mention the Old), nor the performance of one recorded miracle, entrusted to a woman? Why is there no instance in the New Testament of a woman standing up to address a mixed audience as preacher, much less as teacher, if not to show clearly the mind of the Lord as to the character and sphere of woman's service? Her legitimate sphere is wide and important, and calls for the exercise of her highest powers; but there are limits beyond which the soul subject to Christ will shrink from passing."

(3) The objection of H. H. Rowdon is similar to the one just discussed. He feels that 'Brethren' have sometimes misunderstood and misapplied Paul's teaching on the place of women in the church. Would he place in that category of 'Brethren' godly men like John R. Caldwell, whose *Charter of the Church* had great vogue decades ago, C. F. Hogg, W. E. Vine, W. R. Lewis whose pamphlet, *The Ministry of Women* purports to be "A careful examination of the many passages of scripture bearing on the subject," or William

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Hoste, whose booklet *Sister's Service* was a trenchant reply to Dr. Gordon's advocacy of women's ministry? Did men like those, and many others of like calibre, misunderstand and misapply Paul's teaching? Are we to abandon the carefully considered conclusions of scholarly men like those, for the tentative and unscriptural suggestions of free-lance men, who, to use the words of one of themselves, say of their researches, "This is an effort to give the intellectuals their head without hurting the feelings of the less intellectual"? (*H. L. Ellison*).

(4) One writer says he was unimpressed with the aptitude of a woman's temperament to participate publicly in prayer. He has concluded that her deficiency may be due to the fact that she has not had sufficient opportunity to do so. Evidently he does not base his objection upon the scriptural injunctions, and the inference is that he might hope that if women had more experience they might become more apt in some future day.

(5) Perhaps it is sufficient to say to Mr. Rennie who says that "the matters of women praying audibly and of 'hats' are of minor importance compared" with the Lord's Supper and Baptism, "if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." (1 Cor. 11. 16). What does 1 Corinthians 14.34-35 say? It is part of a lengthy discussion about the exercise of gifts in a public assembling of the Christians in Corinth and elsewhere. That discussion covers chapters 12, 13 and 14, the two verses about women's part coming at the very end. The apostle lays down two overruling cautions. "Let all things be done unto edifying" (14.26). "Let all things be done decently and in order" (14.40). The instructions about women's participation must be considered in the light of those two injunctions.

Four items are included in the verses which deal with the subject of women's part; and it should be remembered that the instructions had significance for Christians other than those in Corinth. The letter from the Apostle had in mind not only believers in that city, but also "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, both theirs and ours." (1.2). The claim that it had only a local application is inadmissible. It is true that the letter was occasioned by conditions prevailing in Corinth when Paul wrote, but his

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answers to their problems lay down principles which have abiding application.

The four items are these:

1. It is not permitted unto women to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.
2. Let your women keep silence in the churches.
3. It is a shame for women to speak in the church.
4. If they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands, (or their own men-folk) at home.

It is not necessary to debate here the meaning of the word rendered 'speak' in our verse. It has been shown by others quite conclusively that it would be a violation of sensible interpretation to translate the word as 'chatter', or 'interrupt', especially since the same word occurs in the chapter over twenty times, and can have no other meaning than that given in our verse. The prohibition is plain enough, and the first readers could not mistake the injunction.

That prohibition is further enforced by the imposition on women of 'silence in the churches', the use of the plural indicating that the instructions had in view a general principle which should operate in gatherings other than those in Corinth. Again it is unnecessary to confute the unfounded suggestion that 'silence' here means 'suppression of noisy interruption'. Most scholars are agreed that the word means exactly what it conveys in the translation. The prohibition, moreover, is further enforced by the curt statement that it is shameful for a woman to speak in church, that is, in a gathering of Christians who meet for 'edification, exhortation and comfort' (14.3).

Besides, the asking of questions is forbidden. If, in the course of the gathering, some things are taught which a woman present cannot understand, she is advised to wait until she is able to consult her husband or one of the menfolk. The inference, however, is that it was quite permissible for any man present to ask questions that he might 'learn', if matters being discussed were not understood by him.

Professor Bruce's Expanded Paraphrase of the verses is worth quoting: "As in all the churches of God's holy people, women should be quiet in your church meetings. They are not permitted to speak; it is for them to be submissive, as the law says. If they wish to learn anything, they should ask

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their husbands at home; it is unseemly for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Was it to you only that it came? If any of you is a prophet or a man of spiritual discernment, let him recognize that what I am writing to you is the Lord's commandment. *But if anyone disregards the Lord's commandment, why should anyone regard him?"*

CHAPTER FIVE—1 Timothy 2.8-15

The second passage for consideration is 1 Timothy 2.8-15, and it may be conveniently divided into three sections: (a) Personal (8-10); (b) Communal (11-14); (c) Domestic (15).

(a) **Personal.** The verses read, *In like manner also*, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but (which *becometh women professing godliness*) *with good works.* (vv. 9-10). In verse 8 Paul had summarized his instructions given in the opening sentences of the section in those words "*I will (desire) therefore that (the) men (males) pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting (disputing, quarrelling).*" The passage must be interpreted in the context of the original intention of the epistle. It was written for this purpose, 'how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God', that is, in a local church (3.15). It cannot, however, be too emphatically stated that in the above verses the Apostle was recognizing sex-distinctions, and gave his advice, first to the men and then to the women. The menfolk were to lead in prayer in public gatherings; and to pray effectively they must be characterized by holiness of conduct, and be free from anger and disputing.

Verse 9 has been a long-standing bone of contention, and has been used by advocates of women praying in public gatherings, the supposition being that the ellipsis to be supplied in the original should make the verse read thus, "*I desire that women in like manner pray in modest apparel,*" a translation which is both clumsy and inaccurate. Obviously the verse should be understood to give instruction not about women praying, but about the manner in which women should deport themselves, not only in public gatherings of the church,

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but in all circumstances. The verse does not give licence to women to pray in public.

Commenting on verse 8, Donald Guthrie remarks, "Presumably the singling out of *men* as subjects for prayer in this verse must be taken in conjunction with what is afterwards said about women." Verse 9, then, deals not with women praying, but with the manner in which women should behave themselves. E. K. Simpson in his commentary on *The Pastoral Epistles* makes this introductory remark: "The apostle now touches on another matter that required careful handling. It may have been submitted to his arbitrament by the Ephesian elders, and concerned feminine proprieties of action or attire, a topic of perennial recrudescence and dissonance of opinion."

The subject of the Apostle's remarks is the behaviour of Christian women, and especially in respect of dress. The general term he uses to describe such women is that they profess godliness, that is, not some kind of hypocritical sanctimoniousness, but conduct which expresses a genuine fear of God, a reverence for His name and a concern for His honour. Character is more important than clothes; and a woman's deportment is a splendid criterion by which to judge the nature of her spiritual aspirations. "We must bear in mind," remarks E. K. Simpson, "that the apostle's admonitions address themselves to church members, from whom even worldly opinion exacts a higher standard of decorum than its own. They are to adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour by unassuming simplicity of garb, modesty of behaviour and benignity of action."

A woman's greatest asset is not the extent and costliness of her wardrobe, but a pious and godly manner of living, both in her own home and in the eye of the public. Her dress is a mirror of her mind. Ostentation ill becomes anyone, man or woman, who professes to be a disciple of that One who said of Himself, "I am meek and lowly in heart." With the arrival of the recent decades of the 'new rich', the danger which confronts the rising generation is the tendency to excess in the direction of garish and expensive dress. Female vanity should be held firmly in check. On the other hand, dowdiness is to be deplored, but "tendencies to ostentatious adornment must be resisted by Christian women, and the same applies to jewellery and costly clothing. In all these injunctions the

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one dominating idea is the avoidance of anything designed merely to promote ostentation, with all its accompanying dangers." (*Donald Guthrie*).

If men who pray are to lift up *holy*-hands, then women are enjoined to dress with modesty, shamefastness and sobriety. They are to be known for their good works. 'Shamefastness,' used only here, has been described as that quality which "shrinks from overpassing the limits of womanly reserve and modesty, as well as from the dishonour which would justly attach thereto." 'Sobriety' is "that inner habitual self-government, with its constant rein on all the passions and desires, which would hinder the temptation from arising, or at all events from arising in such strength as should overbear the checks and barriers which 'shamefastness' opposed to it." It is a well balanced state of mind resulting from the practice of habitual restraint.

'Good works' are the product of godly self-denial, an evidence that the profession of godliness is no mere superficial reaction to some emotional experience, but the result of the apprehension of the meaning of the doctrine of Christ with its practical implicates. The opportunities for good works are legion, kindly acts which do not necessarily flaunt themselves before the public eye. How true is the sentiment expressed by Lord Tennyson in these lines:—

Howe'er it be, it seems to me
'Tis only noble to be good;
Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood!

One of the most fascinating parts of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is that which describes Christian's visit to Palace Beautiful. Whatever may have been Bunyan's meaning is of no moment to us now, our concern is to draw attention to the names of the four inmates. They are fittingly called Discretion, Piety, Prudence and Charity. Every Christian home would be a Palace Beautiful indeed, if the women in it had the qualities epitomized in the names Bunyan chose.

(b) **Communal.** (11-14). *Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, was in the transgression.*

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Those who try to evade the forthright prohibitions of the passage fall back upon the argument that Paul was merely expressing a personal opinion, and that he was in line with the prevailing attitude amongst his Greek and Hebrew cotemporaries. Paul, however, had a too noble conception of his role as teacher, that he would legislate for the conduct of members of 'the churches of the saints', by simply giving them his opinion. In a later chapter, 5.21, he advises Timothy in the strongest of terms, "*I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.*" Those words do not seem to have come from a man who was simply expressing his own opinion. He was writing with the authority of the Lord behind him.

It is sometimes contended that because there is a change from the plural to the singular, from 'women' to 'woman', in the prohibition *I suffer not a WOMAN to teach . . . but to be in silence*, that the Apostle had the domestic set-up in view, and that it was in her own home that she was forbidden to teach, and to be in silence.

W. E. Vine's comment is to the point: "Nor again does the fact that the phrase in verse 11 is 'in quietness' instead of 'in silence' afford any indication that the reference is not to church gatherings but to the circle of the Christian family. That would lead to the grotesque situation that a woman is not permitted to teach at home, that is to say, presumably, where her husband is; yet she may do so in a church gathering where not only her own husband but the husbands of other women are present."

The prohibitions are quite plain:—

I suffer (permit) not a woman to teach.

I suffer not a woman to usurp authority over the man.

"Teaching in public assemblies," writes E. K. Simpson, "appertains . . . not to the impulsive and impressionable sex."

Let the woman learn in silence with all submission. She is "to be in silence."

The clarity of the language permits of no argument. The woman is not to lord it over the man. She is not to act on her own authority.

The reasons for such restrictions given by Paul are two:—

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First, Adam had priority in creation. The man is 'the head of the wife'.

Second, it was Eve who was beguiled by the serpent and was the transgressor. Is the suggestion not this, that the woman is more likely to be unstable and to be susceptible to influence which might lead her astray?

Whatever attitude is adopted to those scriptures, it should be remembered that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." The situation has been succinctly summed up by E. K. Simpson thus: "The Head of the Church allots the posts of the members of His body as His wisdom wills; and those who quit that appointed station for one of their own affecting flout His prerogative of choice to their certain harm and loss."

(c) **Domestic.** *Notwithstanding she shall be saved in child-bearing, if they continue in faith and charity (love) and holiness with sobriety.* (v. 15).

That is an exceedingly difficult verse, and its interpretation has occasioned considerable controversy. Other translations may throw light on its meaning.

Revised version: *But she shall be saved through the child-bearing, if they continue in faith and love and sanctification with sobriety.*

Professor F. F. Bruce in his Extended Paraphrase: *But the bearing of children will be the salvation of women, if they remain steadfast in faith and love, in holiness and chastity.*

He comments in a footnote: Salvation from the Fall came through One born of a woman.

J. B. Philipps translates: *Nevertheless in spite of the curse upon Eve, I believe that women will come safely through child-birth if they maintain a life of faith, love, holiness and gravity.*

New English Bible puts it thus: *Yet she will be saved through motherhood—if only women continue in faith, love, holiness, with a sober mind.*

The Twentieth Century New Testament: *But women will find their salvation through motherhood.*

Montgomery's *The New Testament in Modern English: Notwithstanding she will be saved through the Child-bearing.*

It will be noted that two interpretations are possible.

(1) The majority prefer to think that the Apostle is referring to woman's motherhood, to her child-bearing.

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- (2) Some others believe that the reference is to the Child-bearing, or the Incarnation and all that it involved for woman's salvation.

In his Commentary, T. A. Gurney, after discussing the meaning of the word 'saved' as used in the passage, remarks with evident conviction: "If we take the words as an allusion to the great child-bearing, in which, according to the age-long promise from the moment of the Fall itself, (Gen. 3.15), the seed of the woman bruised the serpent's head, then all becomes plain. In that virgin-birth woman, and through her, man, is saved. . . . The explanation of these words as referring to the great child-bearing meets all the requirements of the words used (saved', 'by means of', 'the child-bearing'), and is natural after the previous allusion to woman's transgression."

On the other hand, A. M. Stibbs, in The New Bible Commentary, writes, in the strain similar to most, "In verse 15 the change to the plural *they* follows a reference to 'woman' in verses 11-14 which is generic and collective. The concluding sentence indicates what each particular woman must actively do in order to experience the blessings of salvation in relation to her discharge of her function of motherhood."

Whatever explanation is accepted, the point of the passage remains that the essential qualities in the lives of women who profess to experience salvation are faith and love, holiness and chastity. The implicates are not to be evaded, if the domestic life of Christian women is to correspond to the demands of the New Testament.

CHAPTER SIX—1 Corinthians 11. 1-16

No careful reader of the New Testament can gainsay the fact that Paul, in the two passages already dealt with, has stated the case with clarity and incisiveness. There can be no doubt about his solution to the problem whether women should be permitted to teach or pray in a public gathering of Christians. Some, however, demur as to their general application at all times and in all places, and teach, we believe without solid justification, that the limitations imposed by the Apostle were both local and temporary. Believing, as we do, that 1 Corinthians 14.34 and 1 Timothy 2.9-14 are relevant for all time, and that the prohibitions imposed by them should

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be observed in all public assemblings of Christians, we turn our attention to 1 Corinthians 11.1-16, and try to deal objectively with the passage which some claim to be a vindication of a woman's right to take audible part in a public gathering of a Assembly, provided she is spiritually competent and properly attired.

It should be patent to every Bible student that, unless there is some misunderstanding of the three passages under discussion, there are contradictory statements from the pen of the same writer. Would not Paul be evidently and grossly inconsistent if what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 14.34, flatly contradicted what he had written in 11.1-16? Apart from any other consideration, he was a meticulously careful writer. Besides, he claimed that he wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and maintained that his words were the commandment of the Lord. There must, therefore, be some explanation of the seemingly contradictory statements, an explanation which will not invalidate the prohibition laid down in the later verse.

There are possible explanations of the seeming contradiction.

(1) Verses 2-16 deal not with a public gathering of the whole assembly but with a smaller and more private gathering. Instructions for the whole church 'come together' publicly commence at verse 17 and continue to the end of chapter 14, in which chapter occurs the categorical prohibition of women's participation, "when ye come together into one place"(11.20).

The instructions given in the first section of chapter 11 in all probability refer to a gathering in the home of one of the Christians in Corinth—not merely a domestic scene involving husband and wife, although some writers see that as a possible explanation.

"Obviously," writes W. E. Vine, "there are occasions other than that of a church gathering, when a woman may exercise the oral ministry of prayer or testimony from the Scriptures, and what the Apostle is laying down here applies to any such occasions. The general principles in these opening instructions are to be read in the light of the commands, subsequently given in chapters 12, 13, 14. The command in 14.34, 'let the women keep silence in the churches' is clear and specific."

He continues, "When, therefore, in chapter 11, instruction is given as to the praying or prophesying of women, the idea

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that the occasions of church gatherings are in view, is ruled out by the command in 14.34, where the reference to church gatherings, to give detailed instructions that women were not to pray or to take part in oral ministry with uncovered heads, and then to give an injunction forbidding them to speak at all, would be inconsistent."

(2) Suppose, for the sake of argument, it is conceded to those who contend that women may participate in public meetings that 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 probably has in view such gatherings, is there not another explanation of the seeming contradiction? In 14-34 the Apostle is laying down a total prohibition, "a root and branch Bill" as it were. In 11.2-16 he is not dealing with the validity of women praying and prophesying. That he deals with later. He admits that such practice was being permitted in Corinth, but in the passage he neither approves nor condemns. The point he makes is this, that whether it is right or wrong for women to pray or prophesy, it is wrong for them to do so with uncovered heads. He was dealing with the branch; the root he would cut away in his later prohibition. The situation is summed up in his trenchant words, "Judge in yourselves, is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered?" (v. 13).

That explanation is only by way of concession, and is not the point of view adopted in this essay. "In 1 Cor. 11.16 the apostle closes the subject of women prophesying by saying that neither they (the apostles) nor the churches had such a custom. It was confined to carnal Corinth." So wrote C. W. Nightingale in *The Witness*, 1936.

It may be legitimately inferred from the passage that in the church women in Corinth were presuming that, because they were equally in Christ with men, they could do the same as the men did. Did men pray and prophesy? Then why should not women? Did men appear in gatherings with their heads uncovered? Then why should not women? The first of those questions Paul answered categorically in 14.34. He answers the second in chapter 11. There is no need to make a detailed investigation of the passage. It is patent that the main theme is whether women should be uncovered, especially in the presence of men. The statements scarcely need explanation.

"The head of every man is Christ; and the head of the

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woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God." (v. 3).

"Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head." (v. 4).

"Every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head." (v. 5).

The woman is to cover her head, "because the woman is the glory of the man." (v. 7).

Because the woman was created for the man, "she ought to have (the sign of) power (or authority) on her head." (v. 10).

How up-to-date are the words of vv. 14-15! "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering."

"The veil," writes William Hoste, "was no mere decent article of attire in the presence of men, but an important spiritual adjunct in the presence of God and of the invisible hosts, and though . . . the covered head would have a voice for the men present, it is not said in verse 10 that the veil is to be worn 'because of the men, as might have been expected,' but who are not referred to, but 'because of the angels'."

In western countries the 'hat' is woman's distinctive head-dress, and in many cases it is being abandoned as an unwitting protest against the idea of women's subordination. To be hatless may be in fashion, but to appear in a church gathering where men are without a head-dress, is a breach not of social etiquette, but of a scriptural principle laid down in 1 Corinthians 11.

Women are not forbidden to pray. They may pray inaudibly in a church gathering for public prayer, saying the 'Amen' with others. They may pray privately in their own homes. They may pray in meetings convened for women where men are not present, but even then they must not be uncovered, for that would be unseemly.

CHAPTER SEVEN—SPHERES OF WOMEN'S SERVICE

Whatever may be the prohibitions limiting the ministry of women in the Assemblies, still the Scriptures give ample evidence that there is scope for a woman's ability in many

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a direction under the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit. Luke has recorded for us in his Gospel the song of the virgin Mary when she began, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." (Luke 1.46-47). Has the Christian Church not been enriched by the poetry which has come from the pens of talented but dedicated women? Have there not been many who like the women of whom we read that they ministered unto the Lord of their substance? Countless women have followed the example of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, and poured out ungrudgingly their lives to honour their Master. Dorcas has set the example for many a lonely sister spending her hours with needle and thread, or with knitting pins, in the most worthy service of helping forward the cause of Christ on the mission field. Romans 16 cannot be read without a thrill as we encounter Phoebe, 'a servant of the church' and 'a succourer of many'; Priscilla who with her husband 'laid down their own necks' to save the Apostle; 'Mary who bestowed much labour on us'; Tryphena and Tryphosa, 'who labour much in the Lord', and the beloved Persis, who was commended for the same reason. The mother of Rufus acted as a mother to Paul when he was on his travels.

Paul frequently gave instructions to women or commended them for the nobility of character which they evinced. He advised the aged women to be "teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed." (Titus 2.3-5).

Timothy was instructed in the Old Testament Scriptures when he was still an infant. For that he was indebted to his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois.

Widows in Paul's day were commended if they were well reported of for good works, had lodged strangers, had washed the saints' feet (a kindly act in a hot country when travel was on foot), had relieved the afflicted, had diligently followed every good work. (1 Tim. 5.10).

What a programme to emulate!

Young women were warned against idle, frivolous living, against tale-bearing and scandal mongering. They were informed that theirs was the higher duty of bringing up a

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family and attending to their domestic affairs. (1 Tim. 5. 12-12).

What opportunities there still are for women to serve their Master by serving others! "It is what we do for Him when no eye sees us but His own, that really tests us. The service of sisters may be comparatively unobtrusive and often lowly, but, when rendered out of love to Him, it will be associated with the doer of it, to His praise through all eternity. (Mark 12.42; 14.9). Who can tell the value He may set upon it, when He who sees in secret will reward them openly. (Matt. 5.6)?" (*W. R. Lewis*).

CONCLUSION

Whatever our attitude to the matters under discussion we would be wise to heed a kindly caution which appeared in an article on *The Peril of Prejudice* in *The Life of Faith*, October 24, 1968. "We all owe it to the Lord to search the Scriptures and pray, and then walk in all the light we discover in that magnificent Book. But let us come to terms with the unquestionable fact that on some issues we may well have a different interpretation as we study relevant passages of Scripture. Above all, let us guard against the tendency of the bigot whose thoughtless comments and occasionally vicious criticisms can lead to the hasty formation of bitterly opposing parties. All this is foreign to the general teaching of the Word of God." (*Raymond Brown*).

Those are wise words. We should remember, however, that it is not always the traditionalist who may be a bigot.

Further, let those who are in Assemblies remind themselves that they do not belong to a denomination or to a union of any kind, by whatever name it may be known. Each Assembly is responsible to the Lord alone and is autonomous. It does not regulate its practice by what is done elsewhere, not even by another Assembly. The sole guide should be the Scriptures; and adherence to such is likely to produce similarity of action in matters of fundamental importance. In that respect the Assemblies form a fellowship, 'the churches of the saints', bound to each other, not by organisation of any kind, but by a common desire to adhere, as far as possible, to the simple pattern discernible in the New Testament.

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Difference on minor matters should not be allowed to mar the fellowship between Assemblies. Where, however, there is the violation of the plain teaching of the Scriptures caution should be exercised, lest the error spreads and policies and practices which should not be encouraged are allowed to cause division. Let the members of each Assembly be fully persuaded that the conduct of their gatherings is in accord with the Word of God. To adapt the well-known words of our Risen Lord: "What about the Assembly meeting in X? What is that to thee; follow thou Me."