

The Gospel of Christ liberates woman to fulfil her creation role

by R H Johnston

Introduction

Some people think it unimportant if women are prevented from taking their proper part in Christian worship, as permitted in 1 Corinthians 11. This note shows that the liberation of women to fulfil their proper creation-ordained role is an essential part of the gospel, comparable in importance with the inclusion of the Gentiles. As with the full inclusion of the Gentiles, this issue cannot be compromised because it is similarly central to the Gospel message. It cannot be set aside for the sake of expediency, any more than Gentiles should be excluded from full fellowship. Churches which oppress women in this way will not be blessed, and the historical precedent concerning attitudes to the Gentiles suggests God may close them if they persist in disobedience.

The status of women in the Old Testament

Woman was created to be a "helper" to the man. This was not an inferior place to man, though her function differed. The Fall damaged this relationship. Eve, forsaking her "helping" role took the lead in her relationship with Adam, causing the Fall. The judgement on Adam was hard labour. The judgement on woman was reduction to slavery under man. The man was to rule over her, and yet her desires made her unable to live without him, and she was burdened by expanded fertility.

This curse colours the attitude to women throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Women were excluded from having any part in Old Testament worship and ritual, and were placed in a comparable (though superior) position to the Gentiles. Even so, some women had spiritual awareness, and several played important prophetic roles at critical periods of Israel's history.

In spite of this, some prophets foresaw a time of redemption, when women generally would take a larger place in ministry. One of the most significant was Joel, who, in a passage quoted on the day of Pentecost, says (Joel 2:28), "And it will come about after this That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; And your sons and daughters will prophesy,..." The church age is characterised by the Holy Spirit being poured out on Jew and Gentile, male and female, bondsman and freeman, on all alike (Galatians 3:27-28). Joel lays special emphasis on the fact that both men and women will prophesy.

The impact of the gospel

Jesus came to destroy the works of the Devil (1 John 3:8). The core of the gospel message is that the destructive work of Satan is being overcome. This is not complete until the end, but already those who are Christians have entered into the kingdom of God. In the judgement following the Fall, Eve was promised a special place in securing our redemption - it was her seed, not Adam's, which would bruise Satan's head. Mary brought forth the Saviour Jesus.

Women played a special part in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus did not regard women as beneath notice like Jewish men generally did (see John 4:9): Jewish men routinely gave thanks that they were not born female. Some women, like Mary and Martha, were included among His close friends. Many women followed Jesus and helped him, by ministering to His needs. The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her hair offered worship so special that it precipitated Judas's decision to betray Jesus. Mary Magdalene was the only person to see Jesus resurrected before He returned to present His offering to the Father, and He had no hesitation in asking her to deliver His important prophetic message to His disciples.

We are told that Mary, mother of Jesus, was among those who waited for and received the promised power of the Holy Spirit. When the day of Pentecost came, Peter quoted from the passage in Joel already mentioned. Women were at last liberated from being bondslaves to men, the curse which followed the Fall. In Christ there is neither male nor female - God poured out His Spirit on them all and they all, just ordinary people, both men and women, spoke in tongues and prophesied.

In the days which followed Pentecost, women continued to play, routinely, roles which would have been exceptional or irregular under the Old Covenant. Philip the Evangelist had no fewer than four daughters who prophesied. Priscilla took the lead role in the joint teaching ministry she had with her husband Aquila. Many of the important people in the church at Rome were women (Romans 16). Women played a full part in church life, in a manner unthinkable under the Old Covenant.

How did the gospel bring about this liberation of the captives (Luke 4:18)? It undid the curse which lay on mankind as a result of the Fall. Men and women were liberated to fulfil their proper creation role. (Women were created to be helpers, not leaders over men. They were not to take man's role: this has not been assigned them. They were to work under authority, symbolised by the veil to acknowledge that they are operating under the authority newly given them in Christ. Whilst avoiding a repeat of Eve's transgression, they must be allowed to fulfil their role in public prayer and prophesy.) In just the same way as the Gentiles were freed from the curse of being outside the law, so women were released from their bondage of slavery.

The Temple of Jesus' day provided a vivid picture of separation. The Holy of Holies was veiled from man, apart from the entry of the High Priest once a year. This huge veil was torn down when Jesus died. Outside, a wall marked off the Court of Men which could not be entered by Jewish women. Beyond that a further wall prevented access by Gentiles to the Court of Women. In the New Covenant these who had been "afar off" (Ephesians 2:13), women as well as Gentiles, were brought near through the blood of Christ.

The Gentiles had been brought near, yet some Jews could not believe this, and tried to maintain a separate position, and did not allow them full fellowship. Every reader of the New Testament is aware of this. It was a continuing and on-going problem, until the Romans brought the Judaizing churches of Jerusalem and Judea to a violent end in AD 70. Paul saw how critical this unity in Christ was to the gospel. It could not be compromised under any circumstances, so he challenged Peter about his hypocrisy when Peter separated when some men came from James (Galatians 2:11-21).

But why have we forgotten the new place granted to women? Jewish women previously got nearer to God in the Temple than the Gentiles. Are we now to say that Gentiles somehow overtake these women? Women too became equal partners with Jewish men in the gospel. Galatians 3:28 proves this: all the major natural divisions of Society were broken down by the gospel, whether Jew/Gentile, man/woman freeman/slave. Thus women resumed their place of a helper with equal status which they lost at the Fall. Unlike the Gentile question, equality for women did not present the New Testament church with the same difficulties. It was accepted by all churches, whether mainly Jewish or otherwise. It was never a matter of serious contention: indeed their liberty provided the opportunity for women's disorderly conduct at Corinth!

God cannot bless churches which deny the gospel

But in some churches today - the problem is now confined mostly to Brethren Assemblies - women's full participation is a matter of contention. Yet their practice is hypocritical concerning their demand that women be completely silent. Not only do women sing in their meetings, but they are encouraged to go to distant lands where they become successful missionaries running churches. Why a different standard at home? Paul would have tackled their hypocrisy with the same vigour as he did those who placed the Gentiles in a second class position.

The issue goes to the heart of the Gospel - God has poured out His Spirit on women and they *shall* prophesy. Who dares forbid them their responsibility to play their full role in prayer and prophecy according to 1 Corinthians 11? God hates this as strongly as the denial of equality of standing to the Gentiles. Men

may no more distance themselves from full fellowship with women, than the early Jewish Christians the Gentile believers.

The prospects are still worse for those who know the truth, yet, like Peter, deny to practice it because it is inexpedient. Knowing what is right and failing to do it, such sin more seriously, and will receive a more severe beating than those who are as yet unaware (Luke 12:47-48; Romans 15:23).

The Judaizing churches failed to listen concerning the status of the Gentiles. God judged them: the churches of Jerusalem and Judea were destroyed when the Romans conquered the land in AD 70.

If God so dealt with them, how will God deal with churches which deny women their proper function? Such churches preach another gospel, an Old Testament gospel of divisions. "If any one preaches a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:8ff). How can God bless them? Let those with understanding take heed, and separate themselves.

These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk). (Edition dates: 11.12.1996, 12.12.1996, 2.10.1997, 2.9.2018)
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