

## “We Are All One in Christ”

by Dan Sheffield

(from *Light and Life* magazine, August 1997, pp.24-27)

**“We may have lots of immigrants in our Free Methodist Church but I will leave the day they appoint one as my pastor.”**

**"You can talk racial reconciliation all you want, but you won't catch me staying in a church with a black pastor."**

Those are statements not often voiced in most Free Methodist churches. Our heritage as Free Methodists comes from a solid commitment to biblical Christianity, and we all know that Paul fought the battle over cultural differences in the church 2000 years ago in Acts 15. He said, "There is neither Greek nor Jew ... for you are all one in Christ." The cultural diversity in the worldwide Free Methodist Church is a testimony to our belief in this principle.

We all know that our Free Methodist forbears felt strongly about the issue of slavery and the need for all human beings to be free and have access to basic human rights. Paul was our standard once again. "There is ... neither slave nor free ... for you are all one in Christ." We take these truths as fact, not fancy. They are pragmatic issues to be worked out in reality, not spiritualized away to another day.

"We may have more women in our churches than men, but you won't catch me in a church with a woman pastor."

Now there's a statement we do hear. However, our founding father, B.T. Roberts, was just as firm on this subject. And just as in previous generations Christian abolitionists had been viewed as radicals and fanatics, so was Roberts on this issue. Our Free Methodist heritage regarding women in ministry rests upon a literal reading of Galatians 3:28: "There is ... neither male, nor female for you are all one in Christ."

One of the problems of succeeding generations of Free Methodists has been the move away from Roberts' exegetical basis for women in ministry to, first of all, a pragmatic, and then a historical basis. The early history of Free Methodism is full of women evangelists and pastors. You may have heard or read statements such as "There weren't enough men the job so women were appointed" or "These women seemed gifted so we let them loose." And eventually it got to be: "We've always ordained women in the Free Methodist Church." But neither the pragmatic, nor the historical basis, while being solid Methodist factors in ministry decision-making, hold much water with people who want a solid biblical foundation.

Is there a case for women in ministry that is rooted in Scripture? There are many sound evangelical scholars who would suggest that there is. We first of all need to examine the Genesis record, which

indicates God's original intention for human relationships. Then we need to do justice to the difficult Pauline passages.

## **GOD CREATED HUMANITY**

*God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created humanity; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea..."*

This pivotal text from Genesis 1:27-28 reveals a number of issues regarding male-female relationships and roles. A crucial point of interpretation is that the generic Hebrew word for humanity or human being is *adam*. *Adam* is not a gender word to represent the male of the species. In fact the Hebrew gender word for males does not appear in the text until 2:23 where "she was taken out of man." Thus every time an English translation uses "man" or capitalizes *adam* previous to that verse, the interpretation is making a judgment based upon "his" own acquired assumption. Reread the text in this light, and sparks will go off in your head! Just insert the word "human" instead of "Adam."

The second point from this passage is that God created humanity as a duality. That is, humanity is not men, with women added as a secondary thought. And it is this duality that reflects the image of God. Men only reflect a bit of God's image; women only reflect a bit of God's image. It is when they are seen together entering into the life which God gave them, that they reflect the image of God. God is a plurality, and so is the image that He created. There are not lesser persons in the Trinity; they are all equal.

A third point from this passage is that God gave authority/rulership to both the man and the woman. Together they would enter into the world and exercise authority. In this passage woman has equal place and power alongside the man; she has the same vocational opportunities.

*The Lord God said, "it is not good for the human to be alone. I will make a suitable helper" (Genesis 2:18).*

Everything else that God had created was "very good." When He created one human being, however, He said that this was not good. This lone person was emotionally and vocationally incomplete. Without complementary males and females, the human race could not reflect the emotional diversity of the Godhead. When the two become one flesh there cannot be talk of authority. There is only mutuality.

According to this text, the lone human was also not up to the task of rulership. God said a helper was needed, one who was suited to help carry out the task. Here we also need to examine the Hebrew word for "helper" - *ezer*. *Ezer* throughout Scriptures is used to speak of God "my helper" more than in any other context. It therefore suggests someone who is able to help me do something I cannot do myself. Perhaps even more powerful than the one being assisted!! So the notion of the woman as

someone who follows the orders of the man and washes his dishes so he can do the important work of reading the newspaper is as far from the biblical understanding as can be imagined.

## **THE CURSE: NORMATIVE OR DESCRIPTIVE?**

*Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you (Genesis 3:16b).*

Is the curse to women intended to be the God-ordained pattern for the rest of time, or is it a description of male-female relationships that have been distorted by the Fall? We accept that this is a sinful world because of the Fall, but we do not accept that it is intended to stay that way. The whole of our Christian experience is an exercise in throwing off those things that hinder us and the sin which so easily entangles us (Hebrews 12:1). Sanctification is all about returning to God's original intention for us. If male-dominance, or patriarchy, is a sinful approach to male-female relationships, then we should be seeking to return to God's original intention of mutuality as seen in Genesis 1:27-28.

## **MUTUAL SUBMISSION**

Let's now skip ahead to Paul's thoughts on this same subject. Paul begins his discussion of the husband-wife relationship in Ephesians 5:21. However, you may notice that the NIV and some other translations make a paragraph division between verses 21 and 22 - Paul didn't! The passage begins: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Men and women must learn to submit to one another because of Christ's presence in the other. Paul said, "Women, this is what it looks like to submit to your husband; men, this is what it looks like to submit to your wife." In Paul's male-dominated era, women were already submitted to their husbands, but he introduced a new way of looking at that. And Paul knew that the men of his day needed a powerful reminder of what their submission would look like: Christ's sacrificial, other-centeredness for the church. He spends longer talking to men in this passage than women, because he knew he was going against the natural sinful flow of hierarchical relationships.

## **THE DIFFICULT PASSAGES**

But what do we do with those seemingly obvious passages that talk about "headship," "keeping quiet in the assembly," and "I will not have a woman to teach?" One of the major difficulties with these passages is the lack of agreement amongst evangelical scholars over the meaning of the original texts. They don't disagree over the various approaches to women in ministry. They disagree over the meaning of the original Greek words and phrases. In these particular places, little known Greek words are employed, or there are convoluted sentences that are difficult to know which "verb" and which "noun" goes where.

For instance, 1Corinthians 11:3-16 includes the phrase "the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God." Through a male-dominated viewpoint we might think we have a "good understanding" of the first phrase, but the second phrase cannot possibly mean that God has unequal power over

Christ! We know that there is equality, mutuality and dialogue within the Godhead therefore the higher "type" should indicate how the male-female relationship should work. Then we come back to: What is the more accurate meaning of "head," if it isn't "boss"? Do you see the difficulty?

In 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Paul's reason that women should not teach, but remain silent is based upon the fact that "it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner," not the man. The temptation and fall of humanity has often been attributed to Eve, giving another argument for the diminished position of women. However, Paul unequivocally states that "sin entered the world through one man ..." (Romans 5:12). Adam was standing right beside Eve and also ate of his own will. Paul clearly laid the blame for sin squarely upon Adam, not the woman. Therefore, what is the point that Paul is making? The passage is further confused by the last phrase, "women will be saved through childbearing" (NIV). If you read three different translations you will find three completely different versions of that phrase, because it is incomprehensible in the Greek.

## **WOMEN IN THE ASSEMBLY**

In 1Corinthians11 we get caught up with headship and head coverings, but we usually pass right by "every woman who prays or prophesies should cover her head." It would seem that Paul is assuming that women will be standing up in the gathering of believers to pray and "to prophesy," which is the closest biblical gift to "preaching" that we can find. When Paul, then, two chapters later, seemingly contradicts this statement by saying "women should remain silent in the churches," he must be making reference to something else.

If you will indulge one moment of speculation, let me refer to our own experience of ministry in the Middle East. In this context, the biblical one if you recall, men and women are generally separated in public gatherings whether at the mosque, the synagogue or the church. In many of our Free Methodist churches in Egypt there is a dividing wall down the middle of the church separating men and women. Only the pastor on the front platform can see down both sides. This is a construction that dates back centuries and follows the pattern of first-century synagogues as well. Speaking in this setting, there tends to be a stark contrast from one side to the other; the men are either attentive and listening or sleeping; the women, on the other hand, demonstrate a range of attentive listeners, gossiping neighbors, nursing mothers and crying children. I remember distinctly in one service, where a disturbed man climbed onto his seat and, looking over the wall, told the women to be silent! I would like to suggest that this is a far more likely reading of Paul's intention than the prohibition of female participation in the service, because the record of the New Testament includes many women leaders.

We have already spoken of the women in Corinth who participated in the service, including prophesying. There were the daughters of Philip who ministered as evangelists. There was the church planting team of Priscilla and Aquila, who were also the teachers of Apollos. In Romans 16:7 Paul refers to Andronicus and Junia as outstanding among the apostles. Junia is a female name in Latin; some translators have balked at such a notion and rendered Junias, the male form.

Another word in favor of Paul's respect for women in ministry is found in Romans 16:1 where he speaks highly of Phoebe, the woman who carried the letter to the Romans. He refers to her as "diakonos," which faint-hearted translators render "servant," but which everywhere else is translated "deacon" /minister/pastor. Phoebe was a deacon of the church in Cenchrea. This word is used of those who have had hands laid upon them for the work of ministry.

Paul concludes his passage in 1Corinthians 11 by saying, "in the Lord, however, the woman is not independent of the man, nor is man independent of woman," a clear confession of his equal regard for women in the church.

## CONCLUSION

One of the tasks of biblical interpreters is to pull together divergent statements from various authors and passages and look for the larger picture that God is trying to communicate. There is a need to differentiate the overarching principles from the suggestions for specific contexts.

B.T. Roberts was well ahead of his time regarding the place of women in ministry. But he had a solid foundation of good biblical exegesis and theology in presenting his case. Why was he respected on so many issues but ignored on this one?

We must continue to speak out on behalf of the disenfranchised, fighting for the full spectrum of rights regarding the place and status of women in the community and the church. We cannot, with biblical rationale, say that the Greek can come to my church, but he won't be my pastor, or that black... Every one of Paul's context-specific comments regarding women in the church must be judged against this pivotal principle of his: "we are all one in Christ," not vice versa.

**For further reading:** *Each of these authors uses responsible, evangelical, biblical scholarship.*

- **Bilezikian, Gilbert. *Beyond Sex Roles*, Baker Book House, 1985.**
- **Hull, Gretchen G. *Equal to Serve*, Fleming Revell, 1987.**
- **Malcolm, Kari T. *Women at the Crossroads*, InterVarsity Press, 1982.**
- **Olthuis, James. *I Pledge You My Troth*, Harper and Row, 1979.**