

Past, Present, Promise

What I've learned in forty years about women in ministry.

DAVID M. SCHOLER

The following article is adapted from a paper the author presented at the American Baptist Churches Women in Ministry Biennial Breakfast on June 22, 2001, in Providence, Rhode Island.

I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU MY PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON MY forty years' involvement with women in ministry, trusting that I am old enough and have been at it long enough that such personal reflection is not in poor taste.

From John R. Rice to Paul King Jewett

My journey began almost fifty years ago in the fundamentalist church that was the context for my early development in the faith. A voracious reader and curious about theology, by the time I was fifteen I had read John R. Rice's 1941 classic, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers: Significant Questions for Honest Christian Women Settled by the Word of God*.¹ I was a good fundamentalist Baptist boy who knew the place of women!

Still, in my high school years I had private, unvoiced doubts about three aspects of my context: the place of women in the church; the pretribulational, millennial, literalistic eschatology; and ecclesiastical separationism. I once went with two friends to their Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Sunday morning worship, and I reported to my pastor that, to my great surprise, I discovered that they worshiped and honored Jesus Christ. My pastor declared: "Son, do not be deceived; the words may be the same, but they have a completely different meaning!"

When I went off to college, I enrolled in New Testament Greek, determined to find answers to my private theological doubts and questions. A long journey must here be compressed. By 1960 I married my wife, Jeannette, a wonderfully strong, intelligent woman. By 1962 I had two years of formal theological education behind me, had become an American Baptist, shed my dispensationalism, and written in a seminary paper that I could find no biblical reason to exclude women from any form of the ministry.

As naive and uninformed as I then was, I had become, within my social and theological context, a kind of "radical" on the issue of women in ministry. Jeannette's reading in 1963, the year of its publication, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*² and my continuing theological education as a budding New Testament scholar drove me inexorably further into the issues of women and ministry in the New Testament and in the life of the church.

By the time I began my career as a New Testament professor in 1969, I was perceived of as a kind of champion of women in ministry. In 1972 I first offered my seminary

course "Women and Ministry in the New Testament." I have no clear evidence for my assertion, but I think it may have been the first such seminary course anywhere; it was certainly the first such in the evangelical tradition of the church. (The Evangelical Women's Caucus came in 1974; Paul King Jewett's book *Man as Male and Female*³ in 1975—the two great landmarks of the evangelical awakening to the issues of women in the contemporary church.) It was also in 1972 that I gave my first major public lecture on women and ministry in the New Testament—before a conservative group of about two hundred students at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. I still remember the first question from the floor: "Professor Scholer, just imagine for a moment that you were a Christian, how would you answer this question . . . ?"

I have now taught my seminary course twenty-five times, have lectured on women and ministry in hundreds of places and contexts, have been deeply involved in these matters in the ABCUSA and in many other denominations

and institutions, have debated publicly most of the conservative scholars who have argued from the Bible for limits to the ministry of women, and have become a professional colleague and

friend of many of the feminist New Testament scholars in the English-speaking world. In these contexts, and from hundreds of women who have been students and colleagues, I have learned much, grown in knowledge and understanding, and have changed in my perceptions, perspectives, and emphases. I want to attempt to summarize what I think I have learned.

Exegesis and hermeneutics

I am, among other things, a New Testament scholar. Much of my learning over the last three decades comes especially in areas of exegesis and hermeneutics. But the very nature of the material with which I work and, even more critically, the persons with whom I have worked, have driven me to invest in the whole history of women in the church, the feminist movement and especially its critiques of Christianity, issues of inclusive and God language, the grim realities of the abuse of women, and more.

I think my most important exegetical-hermeneutical discovery, beginning about 1975 and continuing to unfold, has to do with starting points. When I first taught my course, I began with 1 Timothy 2; after all, that is where the discussion had always begun. My opposition began—and ended—with that text: it was the all-important piece of biblical data. But it began to dawn on me that the New Testament did not tell us where to begin; that was a hermeneu-

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tical decision we had to make—on this and on any issue.

The more involved I became with Pauline theology the more I came to see that Galatians 3:28 was a major focus, if not a primary center, of Pauline thought and that it was a better, sounder, more defensible starting point for a discussion of women in Christ than 1 Timothy 2. This started me down a very long road of research, debate, and writing. The value of this insight revolutionized my teaching and my hermeneutical reflections.

A second critical exegetical development was my research into the women who were coworkers with the apostle Paul in the ministry of the church. I discovered that we knew thirteen of these women by name—Lydia, Chloe, Nympha, Apphia, Mary, Persis, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia, Syntyche, Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia—over 18 percent of Paul's named coworkers in the New Testament. This led in 1980 to my first significant article on women in the New Testament. Although it was not, perhaps, the pioneer piece on the significance of these women, it was one of the earliest studies using these data as an argument for women in ministry today. Much here is crucial, including the importance of the NT term *kopiaio*, "work hard"; the identification of Junia as both a woman and an apostle; and the possibility that Euodia and Syntyche were bishops (*episcopoi*).

A third critical area of exegetical study had to do with Jesus and women. I have had to learn to deal with many issues here, from the most frequent stock conservative question of "If what you say is true, why didn't Jesus have a woman among the Twelve?" to the disturbing and difficult charge of Jewish feminists that Christian feminists who lift up Jesus' positive relationship with women are only engaging in a new form of anti-Semitism.

Let me tell a paradigmatic story. I had a male student in one of my classes about twelve years ago who made it very clear that he was opposed to the ordination of women, and that I could do nothing to change his mind. He challenged every lecture. However, after the one on Jesus and women he announced to the class that he had been challenged and impressed. He said he never realized how deeply Jesus accepted and affirmed women; this would have to change his attitude. I decided to take a risk, thinking—as it turned out—that I knew what would happen.

I said to him: "I will make a deal with you: I will no longer try to convince you of the ordination of women if you will promise me to preach once a year on what you have just learned: Jesus' deep affirmation of women."

There was a very long silence, and then he said: "No deal. If I really did that, women would too quickly and readily see that the next logical step would be to accept the ordination of women."

A sad story, yes, but one hermeneutically important and powerful about the assessment of New Testament data.

The history of the church

Some of my deepest learnings have come in areas of

research and reflection I could never have envisioned in 1972 when I first taught my course, and even in 1980 when I began serious publication on women in the New Testament. The general and overwhelmingly important reality I have learned is the power of history to shape one's vision. To oversimplify, but I believe not to misrepresent, I think that it is relatively easy for "people of the Good Book" to hold the traditionalist position that excludes women from important aspects of ministry when they know little of the marginalization and abuse of women in the history of the church on the one hand, or the wonderful achievements of women in the history of the gospel on the other. Learning the history of women in the church does not alter exegetical facts, but it dramatically alters one's angle of vision and hermeneutical assessment of exegetical data.

I am deeply grateful for Elizabeth A. Clark's collection of passages on women from the Church Fathers, published in 1983;⁴ I use it always as a required text in my New Testament course on women. Two examples will need to suffice. First, Saint Augustine, admired by all for his shaping of Christian theology, said in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* about the creation of a female companion for the male:

If it were not the case that the woman was created to be man's helper specifically for the production of children, then why would she have been created as a 'helper'? . . . One can . . . posit that the reason for her creation as a helper

had to do with the companionship she could provide for the man. . . . Yet for company and conversation, how much more agreeable it is for two male friends to dwell together than for a man and a woman.⁵

Second, Tertullian, a truly brilliant apologist for the church and its faith, said in his book *On the Dress of Women*:

God's judgment on this sex lives on in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. You are the Devil's gateway, . . . you so lightly crushed the image of God.⁶

I have seen these texts open the eyes and minds of hundreds of seminary students, who were then able to understand that the so-called traditionalist approach to the New Testament on women in ministry was, in fact, shaped by a sexist and misogynist attitude deep in the thinking of the church.

It was not until 1991, just over a decade ago, that my constant searching in this history of women in the church led me to Jarena Lee's book, published in 1849, *Religious Experience and Journal of Jarena Lee: Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel*.⁷ This earliest African-American female preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church wrote with power these words, which all my students have since learned as a critical exegetical lesson: "If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear."

One of the most important historical learnings has been

to see that the issue of women's participation in ministry has been argued throughout the history of the church, starting in the second century as attested by Origen. This certainly shows that our concern in the church with these issues did not begin with Betty Friedan and the second American feminist movement!

The first book published in defense of women as preachers of the gospel appeared in London in 1666, authored by Margaret Fell, entitled *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All such as speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus. And how Women Were the first that Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and Were Sent by Christ's Own Command, Before He Ascended to the Father, John 20.17.*⁸ No modern marketing with a catchy title here! Fell anticipated most of the exegetical arguments still in discussion today.

I have attempted to collect the numerous nineteenth-century defenses of women as preachers published in the U.S.A., of which there are certainly more than fifty. One of the most colorful of these is by William B. Godbey, one of the best-known Wesleyan Holiness preachers and evangelists of that time (1832–1920). He wrote, in 1891, a booklet entitled *Woman Preacher*. Godbey argues from the list of Paul's women coworkers and calls Galatians 3:28 the climax, writing: "Farewell old controversy on the woman question, you have wrapped the church in sackcloth and give the devil the world the last fifteen hundred years. Here the *ipse dixit* [very words] of the Almighty, by his servant, Paul, settles you forever. . . . Hence, we see beyond the possibility of cavil, there is no such thing as sexual distinction in the kingdom of grace and glory."⁹

Another critical issue in my learning curve and journey of life has been my engagement with feminist hermeneutics at many levels. I have probably learned most from Carolyn Osiek and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and have been most challenged and sharpened by Tina Pippin. I wrote in 1987 and would still affirm that ". . . I have found feminist hermeneutics to be the most stunning challenge . . . to the evangelical myth of objective hermeneutics and interpretation. . . . Authoritative texts do require interpretation. . . . Although I continue to believe it is theologically . . . and methodologically important and historically valid to affirm that the locus of authority is in the text, such a position is an abstraction that has no significance apart from the reality that the locus of meaning for all of us as actually experienced or practiced is found in individual interpreters, communities of faith, or ecclesiastical and theological traditions."¹⁰ In short, I know now far more than I knew in 1961, 1972, or 1980: that the important biblical exegetical debates about women in ministry are at the deepest level principal hermeneutical debates of overarching significance.

Issues of abuse

My investment in the issues of women and ministry has led me on yet another journey, one I have found both

painful and sacred. Virtually from the beginning of teaching my course on women and ministry in the New Testament, many women who have been deeply touched by it again and again confided in me about sexual abuse in their lives. I began my professional career as a veritable "innocent" in this area; I was as uniformed and naive as could be. Over the years I have been privileged to share what I call the "sacred pain" of many women and, by the grace of God, often to share in journeys of healing. Eventually, I came to understand the deep connections between the awful realities of men's abuse of women and men's exclusion of women from offices and opportunities of ministry—expressed so often with hostility and even venom. These experiences and learnings also reshaped my classroom and my teaching. I was led into more conversations, reading, and reflection.

In 1994 I gave a paper at a conference on "Women, Abuse and the Bible."¹¹ In preparing my paper I learned many things, but probably none so disturbing as the need to reflect deeply on two passages from Saint Augustine. In both his *Confessions*,¹² in a context about the abuse his mother received from his father, and in *Letter 262*¹³ to a Christian woman, Ecdicia, whose unbelieving husband had abused her, Augustine steadfastly encouraged Christian women to silence and submission as that which is most befitting to being a woman.

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Will the future be better for women?

Here, at the beginning of a new century and new millennium, will it be better for women in ministry? Will

justice be found? Will we live out fully, fairly, and faithfully the implications of the gospel? My perspective is limited, of course, but I do wish to make six observations.

We do have, in the big picture, much to do—think of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, just to name three large and powerful groups who actively exclude women from the pastoral office. We have a long road ahead. I have sometimes said that we will not have arrived until a female senior pastor has an affair with a man in her congregation and no one says: "This is why women should not be in the ministry"!

Here are my six observations.

1. As people of the Good Book, and in light of the realities in the church at large, the biblical debate is still relevant and needed for each new generation of young women and men. The issues, of course, are deeper than exegesis and even hermeneutics, but the hermeneutical and exegetical data are genuine and real in the struggle for true partnership of women and men in ministry. The study and debate here must be engaged.

2. I would dare to issue a call to men. As men, we must learn a very difficult lesson: the engagement in partnership without paternalism. Given our cultural and social heritages, paternalism will always be for us a danger. Further, as men we must be active, not passive. How

many are the men I know who—genuinely, I think—speak of their commitment to equal partnership in ministry but who—dare I say it?—hardly ever do anything to act it out?

3. I would dare, too, to issue a call to women: Beware of the danger of making it for yourself and then forgetting your sisters. Never let your own comfort zone lead you to forget the conflict and pain in which many of your sisters remain. Further, remember that bitterness and resentment, even when justified, never convince or convert those who oppose us. It is still gospel truth that only love converts another person.

4. We must, more strongly than ever, confront male violence and abuse in our society. Of course, there are also abusive and violent women, but that is hardly the issue. It is the long, long tradition of male privilege and misogyny that consciously or unconsciously leads far too many men far too often to believe that it is their right to abuse women, in whatever form that takes. The church must speak and seek justice for the sake of the gospel of Christ and those Christ loves.

5. Historically, much of the nineteenth-century women's-rights movement and the twentieth-century feminist movement, and the literature produced out of them, has come from white sisters (and some white brothers). But the issues of women and ministry are ones within and across every ethnic and racial and national and global boundary. These are issues for all humanity, and we must share the struggle and learn to work together to show that for every shade of skin and every language and culture in the world there is "neither male nor female in Christ."

6. We must face a very difficult theological question. For example, in the history of the church and apartheid the issue has been seen only as ethical misunderstanding within the gospel. For the church, the back of apartheid was not broken until it was understood that apartheid was actually a perversion of or departure from the gospel, not just a misunderstanding within it.

Between 1988 and 1994 I came to the conclusion that the denial and exclusion of women from all or some offices of ministry was not just a misunderstanding of the gospel; it was a departure from the very core of the gospel as expressed, for example, in Galatians 3:28. Such a position, of course, increases the difficulty of, and makes more sensitive, the debate and dialogue with those within the church with whom one disagrees on this issue. But, with every attempt to avoid judgmentalism and to exemplify humility and love, we must be committed to the understanding and lifestyle that the partnership of women and men in the gospel flows from the heart of the gospel.

May God grant us courage, wisdom, forgiveness and love. ■



David M. Scholer is professor of New Testament and associate dean for the Center for Advanced Theological Studies, School of Theology, at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA. He was previously on the faculty of North Park Theological Seminary and North Park College, Chicago; Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lombard, IL; and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA.

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Notes

1. John R. Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers: Significant Questions for Honest Christian Women Settled by the Word of God* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1941).

2. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

3. Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975).

4. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Message of the Fathers of the Church 13; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983).

5. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

6. *Ibid.*, 39.

7. Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1849); reprinted in Sue E. Houchins, *Spiritual Narratives* (The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers; New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 11.

8. Margaret Fell, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All such as speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus. And how Women Were the first that Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and Were Sent by Christ's Own Command, Before He Ascended to the Father, John 20.17* (London, 1666).

9. William B. Godbey, *Woman Preacher* (Louisville: Pentecostal Publishing Co., 1891), 11.

10. David M. Scholer, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987), 412–13.

11. David M. Scholer, "The Evangelical Debate over Biblical 'Headship,'" chap. 2 in *Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt or to Heal* (ed. C. C. Kroeger and J. R. Beck; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 28–57.

12. Augustine, *Confessions* 9.9 in Clark, 252–53.

13. Augustine, *Letter* 262 in Clark, 65–69.

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