

written has remained unchanged over the intervening 2000 years. Paul was writing within the context of a patriarchal world in general and within the context of the patriarchal structure of ancient Israel in particular. There was a time when women were excluded from leadership roles within most ancient societies. There was a time within the history of ancient Israel when women were not even counted as members of the community. Only males could form a synagogue. Only males could serve as rabbis, scribes, Pharisees or members of the Sanhedrin. It was within the context of that male-dominant, patriarchal culture that Paul wrote these words.

The first rule of biblical exegesis is to read and understand a passage within the context in which it was written, but then to faithfully interpret that passage in the context, in which it is now being read and applied. Were the words of Paul meant to remain in place as permanent obstacles to women in leadership in the church? Or are we obligated to read those words within a first century context, but ask ourselves how those words should be understood today? What we tried to do at Antioch was make the case that the world around us has changed, and thus our view of the role of women in the church must change as well.

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CHALLENGING GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE CHURCH

The Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle

SERVE AS PASTOR OF A BLACK BAPTIST
CONGREGATION IN CLEVELAND, OHIO THAT HAS
ORDAINED FOUR WOMEN INTO CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

and has also ordained seven women to become deacons within that congregation. My frustration has been rooted in the fact that none of those four women ordained to Christian ministry has been successful in being called as pastor of any Baptist church of any size. Only one of them has managed to become pastor of a congregation, and that only happened after she left the Baptist church and became a United Methodist. Many black churches in Cleveland and across the country still operate with the view that women have been forever excluded from any leadership role in the church.

The basis for this opinion is rooted in two passages from Paul, 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12. In the first passage Paul states, "Women should remain silent in the churches... it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." In the second passage Paul says, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

It has long been my belief that these two passages have been read as if the world in which they were

Let us begin with the word *upotago*, which Paul uses in both passages when he refers to women learning in silence and not speaking in the church. Note that Paul does not say that women should not preach in

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the church. Paul says that women should not speak in the church; they must be silent! There is not one single church in the country that could survive on a literal reading of these two passages. Opponents of women in ministry seek to draw a line around the pulpit and say that women should not preach! In fact, Paul was drawing a much broader line within the first-century context when he said that women must not speak in the churches.

It is foolish to say, based upon these two biblical passages, that women cannot speak from the pulpit but they may do so from a side lectern or from the floor. Once a church allows a woman to speak in the church, no matter from what location, they have already moved beyond Paul's restrictive comments in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12. Imagine any church where women cannot and do not speak. That would have to include Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, mid-week prayer meetings, reading announcements at the Sunday service or raising a question at a congregational meeting. Opposing women in ministry based upon these two Pauline texts is to be guilty of the worst kind of exegesis. All you really have is a prejudice or a bias looking for some shred of biblical justification. Our first response to discrimination based upon gender was solid exegesis.¹ I invite all pastors and theology professors to do the same.

Our second response was to remind our critics of everything Paul said and did on this topic of women in the church. 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 were not the only places where he addressed the role

of women in the church. There is the wonderful language of Galatians 3:26-28 where Paul also says:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

I can remember during the days of the Civil Rights Movement how black preachers would castigate segregation and racism within white churches by referring to these words, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile and neither slave nor free." Those black preachers were using the language of Paul to contend for their own humanity and to condemn any form of discrimination being directed toward them, especially when that discrimination came from other Christians.

How ironic it is that I now hear black pastors opposing women in ministry based upon a selective reading of Scripture, overlooking entirely the fact that Paul links the end of gender discrimination to the end of racial and class discrimination in one powerful passage. As Demetrius Williams states so forcefully, "African American churches can no longer advocate racial equality on biblical grounds and at the same time support sexism in the churches using

the same Bible."² The Bible cannot be used to condemn racism but be cited to support sexism.

It pains me to listen to my black Baptist colleagues support any cause that opposes discrimination based upon race or class, but employ the same twisted use of Scripture once used against them by white racists to now justify their opposition to women in ministry. Determined action by a local church based upon solid biblical exegesis is the best response.

Of equal importance to the argument about Paul and the issue of women in ministry is Paul's reference to Phoebe as *diakonos* (deacon or servant) in Romans 16:1, which is the same term Paul uses when he refers to the work of deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Paul was not referring to Phoebe as a "deaconess" by which we would mean a woman who is married to a "real deacon." Paul was referring to Phoebe as a servant-leader in the church. Women serving in leadership roles in today's church are walking in the footsteps of Phoebe.³

Women serving in leadership roles in today's church are walking in the footsteps of Phoebe.

All that remains in the fight against gender discrimination is moral conviction and personal courage to do what one believes to be right, whether or not other persons or other congregations do the same. It is undoubtedly true that discrimination in all its ugly forms continues to exist because people who know better are still afraid to break away from the status quo and behave differently than their peers.

The absence of such moral conviction is demonstrated in a powerful scene in the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, by Isabel Wilkerson.⁴ A man named Robert Foster is fleeing his

native Louisiana by migrating west to California, believing that racial discrimination would end once he got west of Texas. Instead, while seeking a motel room near Phoenix, Arizona he was repeatedly turned away because of his color. The last time he was turned away was by a couple from Illinois that said, "We don't share the opinion of the people in this area. But if we take you in, the rest of the motel owners will ostracize us. We just can't do it. I'm sorry."⁵

This is our greatest problem: not the obstinance of truly hateful and bigoted people in our world and in our churches, but the cowardice of those who refuse to stand alone for fear of being ostracized by others. Prejudice and discrimination can exist only when otherwise good people conform to the status quo and say, "We just can't do it." In the stirring words of the 2008 Barack Obama campaign, "Yes We Can." To paraphrase the great Edmund Burke, "The only thing needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing."

NOTES

¹ Marvin McMickle, *Deacons in Today's Black Baptist Church*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2010.

² Demetrius Williams, *An End to This Strife: The Politics of Gender in African American Churches*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004, p. 71.

³ Marvin McMickle, "In the footsteps of Phoebe" in *Deacons in Today's Black Baptist Church*, pp. 76-90.

⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, New York: Random House, 2010.

⁵ Ibid, p. 209

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