

PUBLIC ROLES FOR WOMEN IN THE PAULINE CHURCH: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE EVIDENCE

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Much literature has recently appeared on the role of women in the Church. Despite the variety of viewpoints, they represent three basic approaches. The first of these, the traditional, maintains that there are culturally transcendent and normative Pauline prohibitions against women occupying certain roles in the Church. Another, the hermeneutical, is to assert that generally accepted hermeneutical principles indicate that these prohibitions were specific for Paul's culture and not normative. The third course, the critical, is to assign one or more texts to deutero-Pauline authorship so as to save Paul from the charge of "male chauvinism."

These approaches fail to account for all of the data. The traditional approach does not adequately explain the fundamental distinction, which it requires, between prophecy and teaching. Hermeneutical arguments deal with this by *ad hoc* attempts to explain away culturally embarrassing material. The critical approach saves Paul but constructs a "Paul" who, ever so conveniently, is a feminist. None of these sufficiently explains the exegetical problem that results from permission for women to prophesy but not teach. We propose that reconsideration of the exegetical question provides a key to consistent understanding of public roles for women in the Pauline tradition.

To define the exegetical problem we will first examine the three major texts concerning public roles for women in the Pauline Church (1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:33-36; 1 Tim 2:15.) We will further pursue the nature of prophet, teacher, and priest and a study of Greek standards for women in public. This, we believe, will lead to a coherent understanding of permissible roles for women in the Pauline Church.

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¹We do not intend to offer a detailed exegesis of the three texts. Such analysis would simply be duplicating existing work. Only the salient points about the activity of women will be noted. For detailed exegesis one may consult the recent articles by P. B. Payne, "Libertarian Women in Ephesus: A Response to Douglas J. Moo's Article, '1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance,'" *Trinity Journal* 2 NS (1981) 169-197; D. J. Moo, "The Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-15: A Rejoinder," *Trinity Journal* 2 NS (1981) 198-222; G. R. Osborne, "Hermeneutics and Women in the Church," *JETS* 20 (1977) 337-352; G. W. Tromph, "On Attitudes Toward Women in Paul and Paulinist Literature," *CBQ* 42 (1980) 196-215.

I. THE THREE MAJOR TEXTS

Public prayer and prophecy by women were permitted in 1 Cor 11:2-16. While some traditionalists have asserted that Paul is speaking hypothetically, this is inconsistent with the grammar of the passage. One would expect a condition contrary-to-fact, which is not the grammatical construction found here. Furthermore, as has been noted² it would be quite strange for him to devote a lengthy argument to the proper fashion for a practice he is about to condemn as wrong. Men and women, however, were prohibited from praying or prophesying in the manner prescribed for the other. Women were to cover their heads, while men were forbidden to cover theirs. Deviant practices were considered "shameful" or "improper" because they "dishonor the head" (vv 4-5). Since headship refers (v 2) to authority figures, to improperly cover or not cover one's head reflects insubordination to his/her superior.

Prophecy by its very nature must be public. Others have suggested that there were separate services for men and women, but there is no hard evidence to support the idea.³ No distinction of place is made in this passage, so its parallelism indicates that both men and women prophesied under the same circumstances. Even if there had been different services for believers and unbelievers the problem would remain. According to 1 Cor 14:20-24, Paul considers prophecy to be an important evangelistic tool—indeed, a superior tool.⁴ Since Paul argues that prophecy is useful both for edification and evangelism, prophecy would be expected to occur at services for both believer and unbeliever.

Lacking evidence that women were ever told in which services they could pray or prophesy, we must admit that women could do both, publicly, in the Pauline Church.

However, in 1 Cor 14:33b-36 women are enjoined not to speak. The meaning of *lalein* here is crucial. Because of the broad range of possibilities, its meaning must be deduced from context. In v 35 women are to ask questions at home. This command is followed by a *gar* clause, explaining that it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. *Lalein* then refers to asking questions in public—quite possibly a reference to the examination of the prophets in v 29.⁵ If a woman spoke in this manner she violated the principle of submission (v 34).

Strictly speaking, this section is not the contradiction to 1 Cor 11:2-16 that some have contended.⁶ Prophecy imparts knowledge to others (1 Cor 14:3), while

²Osborne, "Hermeneutics" 343.

³As Osborne ("Hermeneutics" 344) must admit.

⁴This is the point of that somewhat enigmatic section, as demonstrated by B. Johanson, "Tongues, A Sign For Unbelievers?: A Structural and Exegetical Study of I Corinthians 14:20-25," *NTS* 25 (1978-79) 180-203.

⁵J. B. Hurley, "Did Paul Require Veils or Silence of Women?," *WTJ* 35 (1972/3) 203; E. E. Ellis, "The Silenced Wives of Corinth (I Corinthians 14:34-35)," *New Testament Textual Criticism: Essays in Honor of Bruce M. Metzger* (ed. E. J. Epp and G. D. Fee; Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 216-218; Moo, "Interpretation" 207.

⁶H. Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 246.

14:33-35 deals with learning. We conclude from these passages that women were permitted to pray or prophesy but not to ask questions.

1 Tim 2:11-15 goes even further than 1 Cor 14:33b-36: Women were not only to be silent but additionally were neither to teach nor to have authority over men (v 12). Both to teach and to have authority are said to violate teachings about submission. A woman who taught somehow asserted an improper authority over her husband.⁷

We have seen, then, that women were permitted both to pray and to prophesy in public because the proper submission relationship to their "heads" was maintained so long as their heads were covered. For women to ask questions in public was insubordinate and shameful. Similarly, women who taught also violated requirements for wifely submission.

How are we to account for this curious state of affairs?

II. PROPHET, TEACHER AND PRIEST

Among the proposals that traditionalists have made is that there is some intrinsic difference between the authority of prophecy and teaching.⁸ Prophecy, however, does not lack authority in the early Christian Church. Apostleship is repeatedly linked with prophecy.⁹ It is stated in Acts 15:22, 32 that Barnabas and Silas—prophets—were leaders in the Jerusalem Church. According to Eph 2:20 the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. In *Did.* 9-10 only the prophets have authority to improvise prayers for the elements of the Eucharist, setting them apart from all other leaders of the Church. Prophets are leaders in much the same way as teachers, according to Eph 4:11. Certainly the two gifts are not identical, but these texts do not indicate the difference in authority that Foh's and Hurley's explanations require. One gets the impression that they have merely offered *ad hoc* explanations to avoid a contradiction.

Moo attempts to make a distinction between the "vertical" and "horizontal" natures of the authority inherent in prophecy and teaching. He contends that the prophet's relationship is more "vertical" or more "directly 'pneumatic'" than the teacher's and thus less personally involved with the congregation.¹⁰ This idea comes to grief on Paul's description (1 Corinthians 14) of the prophet. The prophet encourages, comforts and exhorts the congregation (v 2). He speaks in such a manner that the unbeliever is convinced and judged, and the hidden matters of his heart are exposed (vv 24-25), so that he worships God. Such a ministry is at least as personal as the teacher who hands down the traditions of Christian-

⁷E.g. Payne, "Libertarian" 187.

⁸Hurley, "Did Paul Require" 216-218; S. T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 104.

⁹The discussion by G. Friedrich, "Prophètes," *TDNT* 6 (1968) 828-861, is quite helpful on this matter, and most of the references that follow are discussed in greater detail there. See also Payne, "Libertarian" 184.

¹⁰Moo, "Interpretation" 207.

ity. In fact, if any difference exists it could be argued that it provides the prophet with greater authority than the teacher.¹¹

Moo also asserts that the authority of the prophet is more "derived" than that of the teacher.¹² But since the work of the teacher is based on Scripture and tradition, it follows that the teacher's authority must also be derived, even if from a different source. Unfortunately, Moo did not explain why the difference in source is so important, nor is it apparent why it should be. Certainly both teaching and prophecy are subject to scrutiny, as the example of the Bereans (Acts 17) and Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians 14 show. Moo, while correctly perceiving the difference between prophecy and teaching, does not have an adequate explanation for the fact that women could do one but not the other.

Based on this evidence, both prophet and teacher were authority figures in early Christianity. One would expect, on theological grounds alone, either that both roles would be acceptable for women or that neither would be. Since this is not so, one must look elsewhere for an explanation.

Advocates of a hermeneutical solution attempt to identify situations peculiar to the churches addressed in the letters. They claim that, since those circumstances have changed, the commands based on them are no longer binding.¹³ One suggested rationale, as an example, for 1 Cor 14:33b-36 is that women asked rude or unedifying questions as a result of their ignorance. Similarly 1 Tim 2:11-15 is explained by the danger of false teaching in the Church: "Verses 11 and 12, therefore, deal with the importance of adequate preparation, and the need to guard against excessive dependence upon emotional wiles of uneducated women in influencing the church for false doctrine."¹⁴ Such views are based on the idea that women were generally uneducated in the Hellenistic era.

Women were not as ignorant as they are often portrayed. Turner has an interesting discussion about a literate, upper-middle-class woman who had a copy of Homer buried with her.¹⁵ Inscriptions describe special magistrates concerned with the education of women in the Hellenistic era.¹⁶ Some cities had parallel competitions for boys and girls in music and poetry, in addition to compe-

¹¹For a comparison one can look at the state of affairs described so well by P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *JRS* 61 (1971) 80-101. He shows (pp. 91 ff.) that the source of authority for the holy man was his separation from the common people. This separation gave rise to an objectivity that led to his role as a mediator.

¹²Moo, "Interpretation" 207.

¹³See Osborne, "Hermeneutics," for a summary of most of the material. The arguments of Payne, "Libertarian," are more sophisticated but are still based on this approach. His ideas will be treated separately below.

¹⁴A. H. Stouffer, "The Ordination of Women: Yes," *Christianity Today* 25 (February 20, 1981) 15 [259].

¹⁵E. G. Turner, *Greek Papyri* (Princeton: University Press, 1968) 76-77. On this subject generally see S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken, 1975) 136-139, 170-176, 191-192. The following discussion is more applicable to middle- and upper-class women, which shows that how much education one received was tied to socio-economic factors as well as to sex. If a woman was uneducated it was as much a product of her status as her sex.

¹⁶See H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956) 35.

tion, for girls only, in beauty and household management.¹⁷ Hellenistic moralists, like Plutarch and Musonius Rufus,¹⁸ placed much value on educating women—particularly since it would make them more submissive and less willing to follow foolish ideas (like astrology). On the whole women may have had less formal education than their husbands, but it does not follow that they were uneducated. These injunctions cannot be attributed to women's ignorance.

Payne sees the situation in 1 Timothy as a dispute between Gentile libertarians and Jewish legalists. Because this conflict poses no problem today, the strictures laid down are now irrelevant.¹⁹ His historical analysis may well be correct and help to resolve many of the exegetical problems associated with the letter, but the point is moot: The explanation will not work for 1 Corinthians 14, which is clearly bound to common tradition, as the reference to "all the churches of the saints" (v 33b) demonstrates. Conzelmann correctly underscores "the 'ecumenical' nature" of the command.²⁰ Similarly 1 Tim 2:8-15 opens with Paul's wish that men pray "in every place" (i.e., in every church). A series of commands ("in the same way") for women follows, among which is the injunction not to teach.

Thus 1 Corinthians 14 clearly appeals to a common, ecumenical tradition, and 1 Timothy 2 probably does as well.²¹ This fact has also been overlooked by others invoking hermeneutical solutions. Although they find many possible historical reasons for the commands, none can be generalized to explain the existence of a common tradition. When a text appeals to "common tradition" any hermeneutical explanation must be based not on local problems but on something common to "all the churches," such as something in Greco-Roman culture. Only such a broad basis could account for a tradition shared by "all the churches."

Critical scholars have recognized that the problem posed by these texts has defied solution.²² They propose that one or more of these texts be considered as later developments within the Pauline tradition rather than attributed to Paul.²³ Tromph, for example, has recently argued that all three of the texts in question are deutero-Pauline. Such an approach does solve the exegetical problem and in the process clears Paul of the charge of "male chauvinism." Tromph must admit, though, that the "spuriousness" cannot be proven "nor can Pauline authorship

¹⁷Ibid.; see also p. 144 on the law at Teos requiring identical education for women.

¹⁸See the discussion below.

¹⁹Payne, "Libertarian" 185-190.

²⁰Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* 246.

²¹Noted correctly by Tromph, "Attitudes" 209; M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 45.

²²Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* 246.

²³That is, it is not the authorship as such that is the problem here. After all, we do not possess anything written by Socrates or Jesus, yet we feel there are ideas that can be traced to either of them. Rather the question is whether these texts describe one coherent approach to "women in ministry" or whether they show signs of major historical developments that must be attributed to two or more individuals.

be denied outright."²⁴ While absolute proof cannot be demanded of every critical reconstruction,²⁵ an evangelical approach to Scripture dictates that one have compelling reason to adopt such a radical solution. Worse, even Tromph laments that at best a critical reconstruction leaves the text within the canon "while women are left with unpalatable scripture."²⁶

We believe that a more adequate solution can be found by examining standards for women in the Greco-Roman world.

III. GREEK STANDARDS FOR WOMEN IN PUBLIC

Women routinely functioned as priests in the Greco-Roman world.²⁷ They served female deities and officiated at cultic activities, which included offering the ritual prayers. Foh²⁸ recognizes the role of women in the cult of Aphrodite, for example.

There is considerable evidence for the existence of woman prophets in antiquity, so we will limit the discussion to two of the most important.

The most famous prophetess in the Greek world was the Pythia at Delphi.²⁹ She was an older woman (probably over 50) and could well have been a wife and mother. What is important for our purposes is that Plutarch, Aelius Aristides, and Maximus of Tyre were all proud that the upbringing and education of the prophetess were irrelevant to her duties. When questions were answered it was by Apollo's wisdom, not the woman's. She was simply Apollo's mouthpiece.

The Sibyl was another important prophetess in antiquity.³⁰ The authorship of what has been handed down as Sibylline Oracles does not concern us here. Plato (*Phaedrus* 244) mentions her as a famous Greek prophetess. Clement of Alexandria, in the late second century, also cites her as a famous prophetess. He quotes her in the *Protrepticus*, an apologetic work, stating in chap. 8 that women who spoke as oracles could speak the truth in some cases.³¹

We conclude that there was general agreement in the Greek world that women could function effectively as prophetesses and priestesses.

²⁴Tromph, "Attitudes" 215.

²⁵See e.g. the discussion of Bousset's problem with *maranatha* in H. Boers, *What Is New Testament Theology?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 62-63.

²⁶Tromph, "Attitudes" 215.

²⁷See H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (2d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1956) 10.

²⁸Foh, *Women* 119.

²⁹This discussion is entirely based on Parke and Wormell, *Delphic* 10-35.

³⁰See also *ibid.*, p. 13 n. 39; H. W. Parke, *Greek Oracles* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967) 49-55, 132-133.

³¹That is, so long as the oracle advanced his case and not the pagan case. On this, one should examine Eusebius, *PE*, books 4, 5 and 11.

Much less information exists about women as teachers in the Greco-Roman world. As has been seen, women did receive education in the ancient world. However, they normally did not become teachers. It is in fact quite difficult to find Hellenistic women who could be termed "teachers." To illustrate, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*³² contains only one woman—Hipparchia—in its ten books. Actually she provides an illustration of how women were not accepted in teaching roles: Hipparchia was a Cynic who married the famous Cynic, Crates, despite her parents' disapproval (6.96). Cynics were notorious for their disregard for conventional standards of society. This couple was no exception, as the description of their public behavior (6.96-97) shows.³³ Elsewhere she was confronted at a dinner party (6.98) for violating her proper role as a woman, by a guest who quoted Euripides, *Bacchae* 1236: "Who is this who leaves the loom . . . ?" Her offense? To have refuted the philosopher Theodorus.³⁴

The Greek view of teachers prevented "respectable" women from occupying that role. Greek education was centered around a master who had a deep, personal, extended relationship with his pupils.³⁵ Originally this relationship included pederasty.³⁶ While the sexual element receded, reverence for the teacher never did.³⁷ By definition he was an authority figure. The paucity of women teachers, then, is not surprising. Because of the authority inherent in the Greek conception of the role, women teachers would have been unacceptably domineering. They could not have been teachers and still have appeared to be the submissive figures society demanded them to be.

This distinction in permissible roles for women can be seen in a number of authors in the ancient world, so we will select three of them.³⁸ In addition, these authors will also show us that their attitudes toward women were not consistent by modern standards. Acceptable roles for women in these authors show a tension between philosophical thinking, which leads to greater freedom, and traditional attitudes, which lead to less freedom.

³²Diogenes Laertius is cited by book and section in LCL.

³³*Syngignomai* in this context probably refers to sexual intercourse; see LSJ, *syngignomai*, #3, and the euphemistic translation in LCL.

³⁴This forms an interesting parallel to 1 Cor 14:33b-36.

³⁵See the last scene of Plato's *Phaedo* as an example of the bond that develops between teacher and student.

³⁶As Alcibiades' remarks in Plato's *Symposium* 215a-219d indicate.

³⁷Marrou, *History* 221.

³⁸We do not intend to offer a full survey of Greek and Roman writers on this subject. Fuller discussions are in W. A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *HR* 13 (1973-74) 167-180; Pomeroy, *Goddesses*. Such a discussion is really beyond the scope of an article such as this. We only intend to demonstrate that the distinction between prophecy and teaching can be paralleled in pagan authors who are obviously independent of Paul.

A crucial source for thinking on women in antiquity is the works of Plato.³⁹ A very important text for our purposes is found in *Phaedrus* 244:

But truly the greatest of blessings come to us from inspiration, that is, the kind that is given by divine gift. Indeed, the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona accomplish many wonderful things, both for individuals and the public when they are inspired, but when they are in their right mind, they do little or nothing. And if we mention the Sibyl and the others who give oracles by divine inspiration and predict many things before they happen for many people, we would speak too long about things that are clear to all.

Plato ascribes great worth to women who pray and prophesy in public, since they are simply mouthpieces for a god. Such women confer great blessing on Greece. Later he says that these women also pray while inspired and that their prayers are efficacious when the greatest of evil occurs. However, little or no good results when these women speak in their right minds. Only inspired women confer these benefits. Hence prophecy and praying are acceptable because it is assumed that the women themselves do not speak. Teaching, which requires the woman's mind, would presumably accomplish "little or nothing."

It is true that there are the passages in the *Republic* and the *Laws* that are quite egalitarian,⁴⁰ but this evidence must be kept in perspective. Both the Athenian (*Laws* 7.805a) and Cleinias (7.805b) know that such thinking runs contrary to the prevailing practice in their respective homelands (Athens and Crete). Socrates (*Rep.* 5.452a) has to admit that his proposals for equal education and responsibility look quite laughable in the light of Athenian custom. More seriously Plato, in the *Laws*, still retains some quite traditional notions. The Athenian (6.780 ff.) observes that regulations for women have been neglected by previous lawmakers and cites a number of reasons why this is a serious problem. Most notable among these are that women are weaker than men (781 a4; cf. *Rep.* 5.451; 5.456a), disposing them to "secrecy and stealth" (781 a3, tr. Jowett), and that women's nature is inferior to men's in its capacity for virtue (782 b2). Thus Plato not only recognizes that his culture does not share his progressive notions about women, but he himself does not abandon all traditional thinking about women.

An important reference to women teachers occurs in *Laws* 3.694-695. One of Cyrus' mistakes, according to the Athenian, was that he gave no thought to how to educate his children and left it to women. The women (of course) could not bring them up sternly and correctly, so the children were spoiled at an early age. Their "womanly upbringing" (*gynaikeion*, 3.694e), devoid of hardship, was the cause of their downfall. The primary point is that an education without hardship will not produce character. It must be noted, in the light of Plato's doubts (cited above) about the hardness of women, that as the "weaker sex" they are not the

³⁹For any Greek author the basic bibliography may be found in A. Lesky, *History of Greek Literature* (New York: Crowell, 1966). Much important information on Plato may also be found in W. K. C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: University Press, vol. 4, 1975; vol. 5, 1978) under the appropriate dialogue. The *Republic* and the *Laws* are cited from the respective LCL editions, with all other references to the Oxford Classical Text of J. Burnet. All unidentified translations are by the authors.

⁴⁰E.g. Plato, *Rep.* 4.451, 452; *Laws* 7.805.

ones to give children the rigorous education needed.⁴¹ Women were therefore by nature unsuited to be teachers.

Plato illustrates that even though women were commonly accepted as prophets and priests there were serious doubts—physically, mentally and morally—about their ability to teach. Also “progressive” and “traditional” notions about women existed simultaneously in the mind of a great thinker. Finally, Plato is perceptive enough to see that many of his “progressive” notions are not shared by his contemporaries.

Similar ideas and problems can be documented in two authors writing in the first century A.D. Musonius Rufus⁴² (c. 30 to c. 100 A.D.) held, contrary to Plato’s views, that women had the same senses as men, as well as the gift of reason (38.26-40.2). However, he applies this solely in terms of traditional women’s work. Philosophy, because it teaches virtue, will make her a better housekeeper, a more faithful and respectable wife, a more sympathetic helper for her husband and children, and more willing to do what is right in the face of hardship. Musonius (46.13-15) specifically states that women’s education should be “practical”—i.e., designed for the normal domestic tasks, not to incite them to leave their traditional roles. Indeed philosophy teaches them the opposite: “to be content with their lot” (42.28, tr. Lutz) and to be modest, not presumptuous (42.24).

Plutarch⁴³ (c. 50 to c. 125 A.D.) also holds a fairly high view of women’s abilities. His aim in the *Bravery of Women*⁴⁴ is to show that women have the same *aretè* as men.⁴⁵ Twelve accounts of brave women are cited, including a Persian woman who ruled a city well (263C) and the Argive women (divinely inspired!) who took up arms and successfully defended their homeland (245C-F). Plutarch also recognizes that both women and men can paint, compose poetry or prophesy (243A-B). He approvingly cites the Spartan custom that temples were open to women and children as well as to men (*Ancient Customs of Sparta* 239C, #35).

Like Musonius, though, Plutarch still advocates a fairly traditional role for women. Wicker recognizes that these women act at times of grave crisis.⁴⁶ It would be unwise to assume that Plutarch thought such deeds were called for routinely. In fact one of the heroines, Aretaphila, after she performed her brave deeds, refused part in civic affairs and spent her life where any “respectable

⁴¹Quite a contrast with the modern world, where women have most of the responsibility for educating children.

⁴²All references to Musonius are by page and line to the edition by C. E. Lutz, *Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates* (Yale Classical Studies 10; New Haven: Yale, 1947). The discussion of Musonius in D. L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in I Peter* (SBLMS 26; Chico: Scholars, 1981) 143-144, is also good, and much of the following discussion is indebted to his work.

⁴³See also K. O. Wicker, “*Mulierum Virtutes* (Moralia 242B-263C),” in *Plutarch’s Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature* (ed. H. D. Betz; Leiden: Brill, 1978).

⁴⁴All titles are taken from the LCL edition, as are the texts. The translations are by the authors.

⁴⁵242F; see also Wicker, “*Mulierum*” 107.

⁴⁶Wicker, “*Mulierum*” 120.

woman" would—at home.⁴⁷ Many of the *Sayings of Spartan Women* have to do with mothers exhorting their sons to bravery and disowning cowardly sons (e.g. 240F-241). Leonidas (240E, #6) told his wife that her duty was "to marry a good man and to give birth to good children." One Spartan woman said, "When I was a child, I learned to obey my father, and I did that. And when I became a woman, I learned to be obedient to my husband" (242B, #23). Two Spartan women who were asked what they could do answered, respectively, to be faithful and to manage a house well (242C, #27-28). In the *Advice to Bride and Groom* Plutarch advises the virtuous woman to be seen with her husband and to avoid going out while he is away (139 C, #9; also 142D-E, #32-33). The household activities should be carried out with both parties in agreement, but they "show the husband's rule and choices" (139D, #10). He closes the treatise with advice on how the woman is to be educated.⁴⁸ She is to share in education with her husband (145E) in such matters as astronomy, geometry, and the writings of Plato and Xenophon. The result of such study is that women will avoid foolish beliefs like magic and dancing.⁴⁹ Just like Musonius, Plutarch thought that this education should not "spoil" women. In fact one of the compliments he paid to Cornelia, a consul's daughter who was well-versed in literature and attended philosophical lectures, was that "she was free from that unpleasant officiousness which such accomplishments are apt to impart to young women."⁵⁰

We see, then, that there is tension in the thought of Plato, Musonius and Plutarch.⁵¹ Each has what could be termed "egalitarian" ideas, but each to some degree is limited in the application of those ideas by the traditional notions of his respective society. In the case of Plato and Plutarch we also note that prophecy is viewed as a legitimate role for women, which they can perform as well as men. In the sphere of education, however, these thinkers have serious doubts about the ability of women to be effective teachers. Women are primarily to be educated at home by their husbands.⁵² This does not preclude them from becoming quite well educated,⁵³ but it does prevent them from being publicly active in teaching or learning. Instead their philosophical training is to equip them for their womanly tasks.

⁴⁷Plutarch, *Bravery of Women* 257DE. See also Balch, *Wives* 147.

⁴⁸Cf. Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.7 ff., and the discussion in S. F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977) 135 ff.

⁴⁹Quite the opposite of the situation that is usually cited in parallels to 1 Timothy. Women are to be educated enough to know the difference between truth and nonsense. Is it not possible that Paul could have wanted women to know enough theology so that they would not be led astray by heretics and false prophets?

⁵⁰Cited by Bonner, *Education* 27.

⁵¹Meeks, "Image" 179-180, also notes that there is much disagreement in the Hellenistic era about proper roles for women.

⁵²The parallel with 1 Corinthians 14 should be obvious.

⁵³Bonner, *Education* 27-28, 107.

IV. PERMISSIBLE ROLES FOR WOMEN

We contend, then, that the exegetical difficulty stems from a misunderstanding of acceptable roles for women in antiquity. These texts are inconsistent only in the light of modern culture. Perhaps this "inconsistency" should be viewed as a mark of historicity. At any rate, regardless of authorship there existed a coherent position in the Pauline tradition concerning public roles for women, which can probably be attributed to Paul himself.

We can begin to reconstruct Paul's thinking about women in "ministry" from the exegetical and historical data presented. Permissible roles seem to have been established on the basis of cultural norms, not abstract theological considerations. How the culture viewed a role or activity of women appears to have determined whether or not it constituted insubordination.⁵⁴ Conversely, any role that was not viewed as inappropriate by the culture was permitted by Paul.⁵⁵

Paul's missionary strategy provides the rationale for this approach. This is most succinctly described in 1 Cor 9:19-23, where Paul states that he conforms his behavior to those around him so he can win as many as possible. Paul's regulations for women are applications of his principle of accommodation.⁵⁶ He attempts to avoid giving any offense to the target culture, apart from the essential offense of the gospel (1 Cor 10:32; 2 Cor 6:3). Paul is more concerned with the success of the mission than in abstract social progress (1 Cor 9:19): "Christianity is good news, not good advice."⁵⁷ This strategy could allow him to cope with the tension between an egalitarian ideal (Gal 3:28) and the patriarchal reality of ancient society. When such ideas conflicted, the Christian woman would be expected to subordinate her rights to the larger goals of the mission. Paul does not envision the Christian life apart from sacrifice but prefers to think of himself as a slave (1 Cor 9:19) who forfeits his rights and comforts for the sake of the gospel. He asked of others only what he demanded of himself.⁵⁸

⁵⁴This is a crucial point. G. W. Knight, "The Ordination of Women: No," *Christianity Today* 25 (February 20, 1981) 17-18 [261-262], for example, may be right in stating that subordination is required in the marriage relationship and that submission is part of the created order. This issue is beyond the scope of this article, and we hope to deal with this larger question later. Our analysis clearly shows that how subordination is demonstrated is a matter of cultural relevance. The "authority" of a role is not determined by the sort of theological analysis Knight offers but by how the surrounding culture perceives that role. No other explanation resolves the exegetical problem created by permission for women to prophesy and pray but not to teach (as we argued above).

⁵⁵This seems to apply beyond Paul. The debate over Phoebe that Moo, "Interpretation" 212-214, refers to can be settled by noting the cases cited by Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 200-201, about the role of the Roman *patrona*. E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 411, confuses the matter by talking about legal representation.

⁵⁶On this subject see P. Richardson, "Pauline Inconsistency: I Corinthians 9:19-23 and Galatians 2:11-14," *NTS* 26 (1979-80) 347-362; F. F. Bruce, "'All Things to All Men': Diversity in Unity and Other Pauline Tensions," *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd* (ed. R. A. Guelich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 82-99.

⁵⁷Attributed to D. Inge; G. F. Will, "Change and the Church," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 1, 1982.

⁵⁸This idea of surrendering one's rights is a very important theme in 1 Corinthians; see 1 Cor 6:7, 8; 8:9-13; 9:12-13; 13:5.

Still, Paul allowed women a great deal of freedom in ministry.⁵⁹ (The evidence seems to indicate that women were slowly but increasingly barred from public roles, but only after Paul.⁶⁰) This degree of freedom can only be attributed to Paul's refusal to bar women from a role unless he felt there was no other alternative. He was just as concerned that the missionary work not be hindered by underutilizing women as he was with women overstepping their "proper roles."

Paul's strategy obviously provides great flexibility. As such, it can be applied to almost any cultural situation. This position need not reduce him to the level of being a cultural lackey. It also prevents him from succumbing to a disease that has often plagued Christianity: mere social advocacy.⁶¹

We suggest that this approach be applied to the evangelical Church today. We must, however, implement both sides of this strategy. We must go out of our way to rethink traditional ideas and find new and suitable places for women to minister. We must also be willing to limit roles for women in a given culture, but only if there is clear and compelling evidence that these newer roles would adversely affect the spread of the gospel.

The reason for much of the current discussion on women and the Church is the issue of ordaining women. As seen above, on exegetical grounds there is no a priori reason not to ordain women.⁶² The question to be answered, then, is whether societal perception of women's activities would prevent them from being effective ministers or would bring the gospel into disrepute.

Since women are generally accepted in North America in a wide variety of authority positions, preservation of the first century's implications of Paul's stance is anachronistic and, ironically, contrary to his theology. Only by understanding the underpinning for these injunctions can we correctly apply them. Otherwise our attempts to protect the authority of Scripture simply canonize either an ancient culture or a modern one.⁶³

⁵⁹See Meeks, "Image" 197-198; C. E. Cerling, "Woman Ministers in the New Testament Church?", *JETS* 19 (1976) 209-216.

⁶⁰We agree with Meeks, "Image," that there was a reaction to the freedom given women in the early Church, but we would prefer to put the date much later than he does, probably near or in the second century. On the basis of our reconstruction we would argue that the reaction can quickly be explained as a later misunderstanding of Paul's position. By downplaying Paul's insistence that women be given as much latitude as possible, one can concentrate on the negative side of his strategy and greatly reduce women's roles. Could this be due to people who have lost Paul's great zeal for evangelism and substitute a comfortable stress on "order" and "calm"?

⁶¹An interesting article on the results of mere social advocacy as it applies to the World Council of Churches recently appeared. See C. P. Conn, "Where the World Council of Churches Went Wrong," *Saturday Evening Post* 254 (May-June 1982) 12 ff.

⁶²Even Foh, *Women* 238-240, has to admit that there is only one good reason—namely, 1 Tim 2:11—for not ordaining women. We feel that that objection was thoroughly answered within an exegetical framework. Thus we disagree with Moo, "Interpretation" 222 n. 42, that one cannot support the ordination of women on exegetical grounds.

⁶³Some allowance must be made, of course, for matters of conscience. We agree with the remarks in Osborne, "Hermeneutics" 351-352; "Women's Role in Church and Family: The Right to Ordain Women Does Not Mean They Must Be Ordained," *Christianity Today* 25 (February 20, 1981) 11 [255].

V. SUMMARY

We have reexamined the three major Pauline texts on the proper role of women in the Church. It was apparent that the main consideration in the regulations was for a woman to show a "proper" submissive attitude toward her husband. Since the texts and Pauline theology give no adequate reason why prophecy and prayer are submissive behaviors and teaching is not, we turned to ancient attitudes toward women. There we found that a distinction did exist between prophecy and prayer on the one hand and teaching on the other. Prophecy and prayer were permitted, originally on the ground that the women were not in possession of their senses. There existed serious doubts about women's abilities as teachers. Thus the Pauline commands resemble the practices of non-Christians. We also noted that Paul was no more inconsistent in his stance toward women than Plato, Musonius Rufus or Plutarch. It was suggested that Paul's missionary strategy could have provided the rationale for these commands. His position is coherent when understood as an attempt to provide as full a range as possible of ministries for women, without hindering the spread of the gospel. Finally, this approach was applied to the issue of ordaining women in the evangelical Church.