

*The Role of Women in the Church
Scripture and the Question of Cultural Relativity
-Raymond O. Bystrom -*

The following paper was first presented to the Killarney Park MB Church in 1987 when some people in the congregation questioned the wisdom of women in leadership roles in the congregation, specifically whether it was suitable for women to serve on the leadership ("elder's") board of the congregation. At the center of the issue was the interpretation of biblical texts like 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Some in the congregation believed that these restrictive texts were applicable to our contemporary North American context. Others cautioned that we should not absolutize biblical prohibitions like these that were designed to address problems peculiar to the 1st century. Raymond O. Bystrom

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Responsibility for leadership in the local church (per town or per house-church) of the NT era was from the beginning in the hands of several people frequently called overseers (*episkopos*), elders (*presbyteros*) and deacons (*diakonos*). In all cases leadership was plural. It is natural for us to ask, what were the duties of such elders and overseers? Although our information is limited (because it wasn't Paul's concern in 1 Timothy or Titus or elsewhere), two things are evident: they were responsible for teaching (1 Timothy 3:3; 5:17; Titus 1:9) and they were responsible for "managing" or "caring for" the local church (1 Timothy 3:4-5; 5:17). This brief description of the duties of an elder or overseer raises an important question: does the NT prohibit women from leadership in the local church? That is, does the NT prohibit women from participating in the activities of "teaching," "managing," and/or "caring for" the local church?

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The restriction of women's roles in the local church as teachers and/or preachers or as one or more of the leaders of

church boards tends to focus on two New Testament texts (see below). In both cases either "silence" or "submission" of women is commanded, although in neither case is the submission necessarily to her husband, it may be simply to the person teaching or preaching in the context of the gathered faith community. Also, in 1 Timothy a woman is not permitted to "teach" or to have "authority" over a man. These two texts raise an important interpretive issue: Do these verses apply to all situations at all times? Some interpreters say they speak to first-century issues that for the most part are without any twenty-first century application while others claim that they speak to issues that transcend culture and hence are applicable today.

- "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" (1 Timothy 2:11-12).
- "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

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The big issue among Christians committed to Scripture's authority for faith and daily life has to do with the problem of cultural relativity, that is, what is cultural and therefore belongs to the first century alone and what transcends culture and is thus a word for all times and places. Usually we bring our enlightened common sense to the text and apply what we can to a specific situation. What does not seem to apply is simply left in the first century. For example, it's doubtful that any of us have ever felt called by God to take a pilgrimage to Troas in order to carry Paul's cloak and parchments from Troas to his Roman prison in compliance with his command to Timothy: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my

scrolls, especially the parchments' (2 Timothy 4:13). Common sense dictates that Paul's command in this instance was peculiar to a unique first-century situation. It doesn't apply to us! Yet from the same letter most Christians believe that Paul's injunction to Timothy to "endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3) applies to us as well as to Timothy. We would never question the fact that one statement is culturally relative and the other is universally valid. And most matters in the Epistles fit very nicely into this common-sense hermeneutic.

Our problems and differences emerge from those texts that lie somewhere between these two rather obvious examples. The result is some think we should obey exactly what is stated and others of us are not so sure. We often lack consistency. Without intending to, we bring our theological heritage, our church practices, our cultural norms, and/or our personal concerns to the Epistles as we read them. For example, almost every Christian in North America agrees with our stance on the two texts mentioned above (2 Timothy 2:3 and 4:13), but the religious milieu of some of these same Christians causes them to argue against obedience to Paul's injunction to Timothy: "Stop drinking only water (It is universally recognized that in antiquity the expression "drink only water" meant "abstain from wine") and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23). Since abstinence is part of the hypocrisy of the false teachers who are troubling Christians at Ephesus, Paul is saying to Timothy, "Don't be an abstainer!" Positively, he is saying, for the sake of your own good health, take a little wine. Yet we are often told by some Bible interpreters that this command of Paul's had only to do with Timothy and not us because water was unsafe to drink back then, or wine meant grape juice, in spite of the fact that Welch's processing and refrigeration had not yet been invented. Although one might be right in bypassing 1 Timothy 5:23 as not having present personal or corporate application, the

real question is why is one personal word to Timothy a word for all time while another is left in the first century?

Frequently, culture dictates what common sense is for us. But so does church practice. For example, why is it that in many churches women are forbidden to preach in a worship service on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, yet in these same churches Paul's injunction in 1 Corinthians 14:39 ("do not forbid speaking in tongues") is opposed or rejected as not belonging to "our" church practice? How can verses 34-35 belong to all times and all churches of all cultures, while verses 39-40, not to mention verses 1-5, which give regulations about speaking in tongues and prophesying, belong to the first-century or to churches with a different set of practices? Again it is easy for 21st century churches to read their own ecclesial practices and traditions of church practice into 1 Timothy and Titus. For example, Roman Catholics & Anglicans find bishops in the Pastoral Letters, Presbyterians find their presbyters or elders in the Pastoral Letters, Plymouth Brethren find support for their congregationalism in these same letters. Yet very few contemporary churches have the plural leadership that is so clearly in view in texts like 1 Timothy 5:17 and Titus 1:5. Timothy was not the pastor of the church of Ephesus; he was mandated by the Apostle Paul to set things in order and to correct abuses fostered by false teachers. Still fewer churches today follow the guidelines for widows outlined in 1 Timothy 5:3-15. Thus, we do need to admit that church practice or tradition does indeed play a significant role in the way we interpret and apply Scripture.

Here's a little story about this matter that ought to put a smile on your face as you read it: "A little church in a remote area had been without a pastor for some time. Eventually, a daughter of the congregation came to serve the church, after preparing for pastoral ministry in seminary. After seven years of

ministry, she left for a larger church. Following her departure, a young man was invited to candidate for the vacant pastoral position by preaching a trial sermon. While the people were filing out of church after the service, a little girl was heard to say to her mother, "I didn't know that men could be pastors too!"

Well, all of this means that since "common sense" is often shaped by our church practices and larger societal practices and since "common sense" has not proven to be a very reliable guide for interpretation, guidelines are needed in order to establish a more consistent interpretation of the Epistles. Again, how do we determine when a text belongs in the first-century alone and when it transcends culture and is thus a Word of God for us today?

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Nearly all Christians, at least to a limited degree, do treat certain texts of the Bible as culturally relative, that is, as not applying to the 21st century. This is why some Christians leave "a little wine for your stomach's sake" in the 1st century, do not insist on a "head-covering or long hair" for women today, and do not practice "the holy kiss." Yet many of the same Christians wince when a woman preaches in the setting of the gathered faith community or serves as one of the leaders on a congregation's leadership board, that is, they wince when Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are interpreted as not applicable for our day and as culturally relative biblical texts.

Furthermore, Scripture, or any given biblical book like 1 Timothy or 1 Corinthians, was published in historically specific situations. All the Epistles are occasional documents of the 1st century, conditioned by the language and culture of the 1st century, which spoke to specific situations in the 1st century

church. The authors never imagined that we would be reading and studying their writings 2000 years later! Their focus was very much on the issues & concerns confronting the people to whom they wrote. Some of the specific situations in the Epistles are so completely conditioned by their 1st century setting that all Christians recognize that they have little or no personal application or relevance for us today, except perhaps in a distant sense of deriving some principle from them that we can apply to our personal or corporate lives. Other texts are thoroughly conditioned by their 1st century context, but God's Word to those people can be translated into new, but comparable settings today. So a degree of cultural relativity is a valid interpretative procedure. But most students of Scripture teach that one's interpretation must operate within recognizable guidelines. Here, then, are some guidelines for distinguishing between items that are culturally relative, on the one hand, and those that transcend their original setting, on the other hand, and thus are normative for all Christians of all times. These guidelines reflect current thinking by students of Scripture and are here applied to the women in ministry question.

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Guidelines for Determining the Cultural Relativity of Scripture

1. *Distinguish between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent upon or peripheral to it. For example, a central core teaching of Scripture is the fall of man and woman, redemption from the fall as God's gracious activity through Christ's death and resurrection and the eventual consummation of Christ's work at his return. But the holy kiss or the matter of a woman's head covering are peripheral issues and/or concerns.*

2. *Distinguish between what the New Testament itself sees as inherently moral and what is not. The moral items are absolute and abide for all time. Non-moral issues may change from culture to culture. For example, adultery, drunkenness, thievery, and greed are always wrong. But foot-washing, exchanging the holy kiss, women having a head covering when praying or prophesying, Paul's preference for celibacy or whether a woman should preach in the setting of public worship or sit on the church board are not inherently moral matters. They become moral issues only if their use or abuse involves a lack of love. For example, Dr. Bruce Waltke, a Professor at Regent College, belongs to a congregation in Vancouver that releases women for all forms of ministry, including preaching and church leadership. Yet he himself believes women should not preach nor serve as congregational leaders. However, he refuses to leave his congregation because he says the matter of women in ministry is not, in his opinion, a moral issue. Now, whether you agree or disagree with Dr. Waltke, his behaviour is an example of Christian love!*
3. *Distinguish between NT teachings that have a uniform and consistent witness and NT teachings that reflect differences. For example, the NT is consistent in these areas: love as a basic Christian ethic, a non-retaliation personal ethic, the wrongness of strife, hatred, murder, stealing, and sexual immorality. But the NT does not appear to have a uniform teaching on such matters as women in various ministries. Romans 16:2, where Phoebe is a 'deacon' (same word used of Paul) in Cenchrea; Romans 16:7, where Junia is named among the apostles; Romans 16:3, where Priscilla is Paul's fellow-worker – the same word used of Apollos in 1 Corinthians 3:9; Philippians 4:2-3, where Euodia and Syntyche are women who are fellow-workers and who*

contend at Paul's side in the cause of the gospel; 1 Corinthians 11:5, where women in the Corinthian church prayed and prophesied in the worship service; and Galatians 3:28, where Paul says there are "neither male nor female" privileges or perks in God's new community. Yet other texts seem to limit the ministry of women: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

4. Distinguish between basic ideal, principle and specific cultural level applications. For example:

<u>Basic Ideal Level</u>	<u>General Principle</u>	<u>Specific Cultural</u>
"Do what is right & good" Dt. 6:18.	"Be open-handed toward the poor" Dt. 15:11	Keep the Sabbath Year
"Do not defile the land" Nu. 35:34	"Do not be hard hearted or tight fisted toward your poor brother" Dt. 15:7	Keep the Jubilee Year
"Glorify God in your worship" 1 Cor. 10:31	"Do not do anything to distract from the glory of God" 1 Cor. 10:32.	"Women wear some sort of head covering" 1 Cor. 11:5.

Thus, in the last example above, Paul appeals to the Corinthians to do all to the glory of God and to do nothing that distracts from the glory of God in the gathered faith community. The specific application, however, seems to be relative and unique to Corinth in the 1st century. For Paul the issue was directly related to a cultural shame that scarcely prevails in most churches in the Western world today. The fact that Paul's own argument on this matter is so tied to 1st century cultural norms suggests that literal obedience is not mandatory in order to obey God's Word. Indeed, in Western cultures the lack of a head covering on a woman's head creates no difficulties at all. In fact,

if a woman literally obeyed this text, she would thereby almost certainly abuse the spirit of the text, at least in most North American churches. Yet with a little thinking one can imagine some kinds of dress – both male and female – that would be so out of place as to create the same kind of disruption of worship as implied in 1 Corinthians 11. When encountering a specific application in Scripture, we do need to ask, with the little story I told earlier in mind, “Would this have been an issue for us if we had never encountered it in the NT documents?”

Basic Ideal

“Conduct yourselves appropriately in God’s household” 1Tim 3:15

General Principle

“Be above reproach”
& “have a good reputation with outsiders”
1 Tim. 3:2

Specific Cultural

“husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, & manage one’s household well” 1Tim 3:2f.

In 1Timothy 3, Paul holds out his basic ideal for the Christian community, urging God’s people to “conduct themselves appropriately in God’s household” (3:15). With the basic ideal of proper conduct in mind, Paul turns his attention to the character qualifications of church leaders in 3:1-2. The general principle is that they must be “above reproach” (3:2) Next, he gives them a specific culturally appropriate list of virtues to cultivate and vices to avoid, including “husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, the ability to manage one’s household well, and a good reputation with outsiders” (1Timothy 3:2-7).

Most NT scholars recognize that this NT literary form of lists of virtues & vices is borrowed from Hellenistic literature of the 1st century. A graphic example is the following 1st century list

of qualifications of a Roman military general by a Greco-Roman writer named Onosander: "I say that a general should be chosen as sober minded, self-controlled, temperate, frugal, hardy, intelligent, no lover of money, not too young or old, if he be the father of children, able to speak well, of good repute" (see Bailey and Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the NT*, p. 66). A quick comparison with 1 Timothy 3:2-7 suggests that a general in a Roman army and an overseer (church leader) in God's household require similar qualifications. Paul and Onosander have a common view of the virtues to cultivate and vices to avoid of individuals in leadership. Paul has likely borrowed a typical list and then slightly modified it to meet the unique needs of the Ephesian church and his Christian convictions.

It has been argued that a list of qualifications for 21st century North American church leaders might be slightly different than Paul's at the culturally specific level (see Charles Kraft, *Christianity & Culture*, p. 259). It is assumed, rightly I think, that Paul's list of vices to avoid and virtues to cultivate is culturally appropriate for a 1st century Ephesian setting, but it may be necessary for us today to create a slightly different list. That is, the basic ideal is still applicable ("conduct yourselves appropriately in God's household") and the general principle for church leaders is still applicable ("be above reproach") and it functions as a guide for the selection of culturally appropriate vices to avoid and virtues to cultivate that are appropriate for church leaders today.

If so, what would a dynamic equivalent culturally specific list of qualifications for church leadership look like in the 21st century North American setting? At the general principle level we would still insist that our church leaders be above reproach, to be sure, especially having a good reputation with outsiders. But at the culturally specific level, our list might include items like serious, self-controlled, courteous, a good teacher or preacher, not a drunkard, not quarrelsome, upright, and doctrinally sound. But being hospitable, dignified, and no lover of money may or

may not be included on a list for North American church leaders. Also, we may not insist that leaders demonstrate an ability to manage a home or family well. These qualities may be deemed important for older church leaders, but we tend to choose younger leaders (and single men and women too!) than the church of Paul's day. Nor would North Americans say, as was necessary in Paul's day, that the guiding principle, "above reproach," demands that a person never have more than one marriage. We tend to allow, and even encourage, a person to remarry after the death of a spouse. But many North American churches (not all) disqualify a person who has remarried after a divorce. A North American list would include most of the items on Paul's culturally specific list but we might add a few other qualities like administrative ability and perhaps even youthfulness. Thus, our list would be fairly similar to Paul's, owing to the many similarities between North American culture and the culture of the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day.

5. **Determine the cultural options open to a NT writer.** The degree to which a NT writer agrees with a cultural situation in which there is only one cultural option increases the possibility of the cultural relativity of such a position. For example, attitudes towards slavery were basically singular in antiquity. The NT writers do not denounce slavery so their position on that question is probably culturally relative, and who among us would disagree? However, the attitude toward women was also singular in antiquity. Women were held to be basically inferior to men. Yet the NT writers seem to speak with two "voices" on the relationship of women to men. One "voice" is hierarchical and seems to be in harmony with the dominant cultural position on women in antiquity. But the other "voice" of the NT writers is egalitarian and moves well beyond the attitude toward women held by most of their contemporaries, suggesting that this second "voice" transcends culture and applies to our day.

6. *Be alert to cultural differences between the 1st century and the 21st century that are not immediately obvious.* For example, to determine the role of women in ministry in the 21st century, one should take into account that there were few educational opportunities for women in the 1st century, whereas the education of women is the expected norm in the 21st century in Western culture. This backdrop may affect our understanding of such texts as 1 Timothy 2:9-15.
7. *Finally, one must exercise Christian charity.* There are good people and excellent arguments on both sides of the question of the roles of women in ministry in the church. So we should not give people the impression that one side is orthodox and the other unorthodox, or one side is conservative, the other liberal, or one side has a high view of Scripture and the other a low view. These sorts of labels are not helpful in the debate. Christians need to recognize the difficulties, open the lines of communication with one another, and start by trying to define some principles, and finally have love for one another and a willingness to ask forgiveness, if necessary, from those with whom one differs.

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If these seven guidelines are then applied to the issue of the ministry of women and in particular to texts like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12, this is what we might conclude.

1. Full compliance with 1 Timothy 2 in the 21st century would seem to rule out not only a woman's preaching and teaching in the local church, but it would seem to forbid her writing books on biblical subjects that men might read, teaching Bible or related subjects on Christian education in the

Christian colleges or Bible colleges or seminaries where men are in the classroom, and teaching men in missionary situations (By the way, Canadian MB's ordained 85 women for missionary work between 1879 and 1957 and 35 of them were single!). Yet those who argue against women teaching in the contemporary church seldom carry their interpretation this far. And almost always make the matters about clothing in the preceding verse (2:9) to be culturally relative.

On the other hand, that 1Timothy 2 might be culturally relative can be supported first of all by exegesis of all three of the Pastoral Epistles. Even a quick reading of these letters, suggests that certain women were troublesome in the church at Ephesus (1Timothy 5:11-15; 2Timothy 3:6-9). They appear to have been a major part of the cause of the false teacher's making headway there. Since women are found teaching (Acts 18:26) and prophesying (Acts 21:8; 1 Corinthians 11:5) elsewhere in the NT, it is altogether likely that 1Timothy 2:11-12 speaks to a local 1st century problem. In any case, the guidelines above support the possibility that the prohibition in 1Timothy 2:11-12 is culturally relative. As a bare minimum, we can say there is sufficient doubt about the validity of the hierarchical interpretation as a prohibition for our day to make it an unwise imposition on any 21st century church. A helpful comment by F. F. Bruce is worth noting here: "In general where there are divided opinions about the interpretation of a Pauline passage, that interpretation that runs along the line of liberty is much more likely to be true to Paul's intention than one which smacks of bondage or legalism."

2. Also, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is quite likely culturally relative.

<u>Basic Ideal Level</u>	<u>General Principle</u>	<u>Specific Cultural</u>
Worship "in a fitting & orderly way" for "God is not a God of disorder but of peace" 14:33, 40.	"Edify the church" and "speak intelligent words" 14:12, 4, 5, 17, 26, 9, 19.	"Women remain silent" 14:34

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

The rule	The women must be silent in the churches.
The reasons	It is not permitted then to speak. Let them be in submission as the Law says.
The provision	If they wish to learn, let them ask their husbands.
The reasons	It is shameful for a woman to speak in the assembly.

MB New Testament scholar David Ewert notes: "What makes Paul's command for the women to be silent so problematic is not simply that it doesn't fit into our Western culture but rather that it seems to contradict what Paul said in chapter 11" that women are free to pray and prophesy in the assembly (*The Church in a Pagan Society*, 171).

3. Concerning 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, some evangelical scholars note that these verses come after verse 40 of 1 Corinthians 14 in some ancient manuscripts and conclude that they are not original with Paul and are simply a gloss written in the margin by a copyist who, in light of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, felt the need to qualify Paul's instructions even further (see Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 705). Fee gives the following reasons for viewing these verses as inauthentic, that is, not Pauline.

- a. "It is not permitted them to speak" (literal translation of 1 Corinthians 14:34b). If the text excludes women from all forms of speaking out in public, then all the previous directions given by Paul, including the inclusive "each one" of 14:26 and "all" of 14:31 were not to be understood as including the women. If Paul himself is responsible for such a corrective, it is surprising that he should add it here, yet allow women to pray and prophesy in 1 Corinthians 11:5.
- b. "Let them be in submission, even as the Law says" (1 Corinthians 14:34c). The expression, "even as the Law says," is a problem. Paul always cites the specific text (see 9:8 or 14:21) to support a point he himself is making. Nowhere does he appeal to the Law in this absolute way as binding on Christian behaviour. More problematic yet is the fact that the Law does not say any such thing. If Paul wrote this, he would have to be appealing to the oral understanding of the Torah such as that found in rabbinic Judaism. A similar usage is reflected in Josephus, who says, "The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive."
- c. "It is shameful for a woman to speak" (1 Corinthians 14:35c). This final reason given for their being silent in the assembly is that speaking in church is "shameful" or "disgraceful," in the sense of being inconsistent with accepted cultural standards of modesty. It is shameful for a woman to speak in church, not simply to speak in a certain way! The author seems intent on keeping women from joining in the vocal worship of the churches. It is difficult to fit this into any kind of Pauline context.

If it is Paul's statement, perhaps he is addressing a unique situation in which women are forbidden to interrupt the meetings by asking questions which could more properly be put to their husbands at home, or by taking part with more ardour than intelligence in the discussion of prophetic messages. Whatever the precise reason or peculiar circumstances "the command for women to be silent in the church cannot be absolutized and universalized," says David Ewert. It is "obvious from the New Testament itself women played an important role in the worship and mission of the church" (p. 173).

Conclusion

In my KPMBC paper I went on to expressing my essential agreement with the 1987 General Conference (Canadian & American) of MB Churches resolution on women in ministry:

- We believe that God created both men and women in his image, and therefore both share an equal humanity before God (Genesis 1:27).
- We believe that all Christians are joint heirs with Christ, and therefore both women and men experience full salvation in him (Galatians 3:28).
- We believe that the Spirit grants gifts to all believers, irrespective of gender, for diverse ministries both in the church and in the world, and therefore both men and women minister God's grace to others (1 Peter 4:10).
- We believe that God calls all women and men to serve in the church and in the world; we also believe that God calls some women and some men for ministries within the context of the local church (Acts 2:17, 18; Ephesians 4:11-15; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Peter 4:10).
- We believe that since God has gifted and called both men and women, the local church should recognize and affirm them in

their ministry for the common good of the church (1 Corinthians 12:7; Romans 16:1-16).

Hence, the resolution went on to encourage MB churches to free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad. For example, women are to be affirmed for decision-making (committees and church boards); evangelizing (visitation and discipling, teaching Bible study and preaching); pastoral counselling (shepherding and soul care), and associate pastoral role.

There were only two reservations expressed in the resolution: 1) women should not be appointed as lead pastors and 2) they should not be ordained. It was felt that our churches were not yet ready to take these two steps.

- Raymond O. Bystrom (A slightly updated version of a paper presented to Killarney Park MB Church in 1987).