

Women Ministers Common in Our Churches

A writer, reporting on a formal debate of a topic of religion, stated sarcastically that the two men spoke to each other in foreign languages so that neither understood what the other was talking about. Hardly a fruitful discussion!

Unfortunately, similar misunderstanding hinders our communication on various subjects because words in common use tend to take on unintended meanings. Some take on a special “religious” meaning. One such word is “minister.” Other related words and terms include *deacon*, *servant*, *preach*, *teach*, *preacher*, *evangelist*, *pastor*, *pulpit minister*, and *paid minister*.

When I state that most all of our congregations of 200-300 members or more have at least one paid female minister, you think I am out of my mind, don’t you? But I am not -- at least, not because of that statement! When mention is made of a woman minister, do you immediately envision a woman standing behind a pulpit before an assembly? If that is so, you need some re-education. And if you only think of a man when we mention a deacon, you need a wider education! Aren’t you fortunate that I am here to educate you? (☺)

The translators of the King James Version ran into a problem in rendering the Greek word “*diakonos*.” Well, not really, for they knew it simply means “servant” or “minister.” Those words mean the same thing; they are synonyms. But so as not to disturb the Anglican Church, they anglicized the Greek word *diakonos* to form the high-sounding word “deacon” which had been made an office in a system of organization. We have been stuck with that official-sounding word ever since so that we have *deacons*, *ministers*, and -- well, we don’t use *servant* too much. Who wants to be appointed a servant! We appoint official deacons, hire ministers, and leave the servant spot vacant. Once I listed the deacons as servants in our church bulletin. An elder got on my case about it claiming that it was demeaning them!

All disciples are servants-ministers of God, but not all are chosen by a congregation to do a special work within the group. There is no indication in Scripture that any church had an official board, or standing committee, of deacons. Some persons are appointed to specific tasks for the church while they are also servants of God in private ministry as well. When a man is assigned the responsibility of building maintenance, he is a servant-minister (deacon) of the church in that area and in it alone. When a woman is assigned to oversee the children’s classes, she is a servant-minister (deacon) in that area and in it alone. Those are functions, not titles or offices, and when the function is completed, the assignment no longer exists.

When a task requires much time, the church may see fit to support the person financially. So, if building maintenance is a full-time task, the servant-minister (deacon) may be hired. If an elder gives full devotion to the work of teaching-pastoring-preaching, the church should support him (1 Tim. 5:17-18). Likewise, if a woman is paid to work as a secretary, she becomes a paid servant-minister (deacon). Evidently, church supported widows were assigned tasks that put them in a similar category (1 Tim. 5:9-16).

There is no precedent of hiring someone outside the congregation as a teacher-pastor-preacher. We commonly hire a “pulpit minister” but will not call him a deacon, nor do we require of him the qualifications of a deacon. He becomes a pastor to tend-feed the flock but we refuse to call him a pastor. He becomes a surrogate pastor-elder but we do not require him to have the “qualifications” of other pastors-elders. He becomes THE minister of the congregation made up of many servants-ministers (deacons).

Does this seem like strange talk? We have let traditions become precedents so long that they seem like law. Our warping of word meanings has made a term like “paid woman minister” seem like heresy itself while most of our congregations of size have them. And we are at ease with giving various titles to a woman’s work except calling her a minister or evangelist.

All right, minister maybe, but evangelist? -- no way! If that is your sentiment, then you need some more broadening to your education. Traditionally, we have said a woman may teach but that she is not permitted to preach, but the reverse of that is nearer the truth. We can find a proof-text that says, “I permit no woman to teach” (1 Tim. 2:11), but no proof-text denies that she can preach.

In our traditional confusion, we have thought of teaching as instructing a small or private group, and of preaching as instructing from the pulpit in an assembly. But the place or time of the instructing, and the size, age, or gender of the audience does not enter into the definition. Women were inspired to prophesy, that is, to deliver messages from God (Acts 2:14-18; see Acts 21:9). Their praying and prophesying in the assembly was sanctioned (1 Cor. 11:3-5) as long as proper decorum was observed. The restrictions of Chapter 14 and elsewhere were not to forbid that activity universally but to correct the local abuse of it.

The Scriptures do not speak of a pulpit, that “holy place for men only”! Neither is there precedent for preaching in the assemblies! Am I further confusing the confusion? Please stay with me. There is a difference in gospel and doctrine-teachings and between preaching-evangelizing and instructing though those elements are often mixed in the same discourse or writing.

The gospel is the good news, but who teaches good news? Gospel is *preached, heralded, proclaimed, evangelized* (Greek *euangelizo, to bring glad tidings*; from which we also get *angel, a messenger*). Doctrine-teaching is imparted by *teaching, instruction, rebuke, reproof, and exhortation*. The gospel was fully preached on Pentecost, but the teachings came through the epistles later. The gospel message was conveyed through evangelists, or preachers, but prophets, pastors, and teachers edified through instruction.

The gospel was not preached to the church. There is no record of such, no instruction for it, and no need for it, for the church had already heard and obeyed it. Although the word *preach* is used over one hundred times in the New Testament writings, it is not used in reference to a believing assembly. The message is the gospel, the good news, the “*evangel*,” while the one who proclaims it is the preacher, the evangelist.

Other verbs relate to instruction and edification of the assembly. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 14, there are fifty uses of verbs of communication in the assembly, such as *speak, prophesy, utter, interpret, instruct, teach, declare, pray, sing, bless, and say*, but

preach or *evangelize* is not used. Revelation, knowledge, prophecy, and teaching are mentioned, but not preaching-evangelizing. Delivering instruction from the pulpit (or elsewhere) about the resurrection or the work of elders, for example, is teaching, not preaching. (See more in "Free In Christ," Chapter 8).

As Philip, the evangelist, joined the Ethiopian Treasurer in his chariot, he preached (*evangelized*) to him Jesus -- "told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). He preached to one person! May a woman riding along with another woman do what Philip did? Could she do it with a car full of women? Could she evangelize a room full? Could she do it if it were her unconverted husband? Or her husband and grown sons? Would being in a room make a difference? Where do the Scriptures prohibit her from telling any number of people the good news about Jesus? (After all, women were the first to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection -- and that to men!)

Who can deny that women may evangelize? I am going to hazard a guess with no way to prove it right or wrong. I propose that WOMEN evangelize more MEN than all the PREACHERS in all our congregations combined. They tell the gospel story to our sons in classes. They convert their husbands and sons. That is preaching! (Traditionally, the male "preachers" get the honor of baptizing them.) Thousands of women in our churches proclaim Christ to persons all over the world each week by correspondence courses. For many years, World Bible School has been our most effective outreach for proclaiming the gospel and teaching the converts. Women do most of it. Does it matter if she does it by voice or by writing? Does her physical presence invalidate her evangelism? Our churches support women to go into missionary evangelism. Many go to other countries to teach English, using the Bible as a text, and thus both proclaiming the good news and instructing. A vital force now is the growing return to house churches and home groups within our congregations, and they depend much upon the women. Having worked with struggling congregations, I can testify that the women were the main strength of the groups even though they were permitted to fill none of the honorary roles that put them "up front."

Will you admit that we who are so diligent to follow "the simple New Testament pattern" in all things and so careful to "speak as the oracles of God" might be a wee bit confused? Has not the hassle we have endured for generations about what women may do been due mostly to misunderstanding of words, terms, and categories? Even if we insist on being legalistic in our method of interpretation, we cannot fail to see glaring inconsistencies. And when we move out of legalism, we can see more clearly that we have made some of the most innocent molehills into mountainous barriers to understanding. It is sad to think how we have made traditional misdirection on various points into unbending, universal law.

Yes, women ministers are common in our churches and most every congregation of size has at least one paid woman minister. Try reading that sentence aloud, positively and affirmatively, to someone. Hey, that's a start!

(Cecil Hook; January 2002) []

